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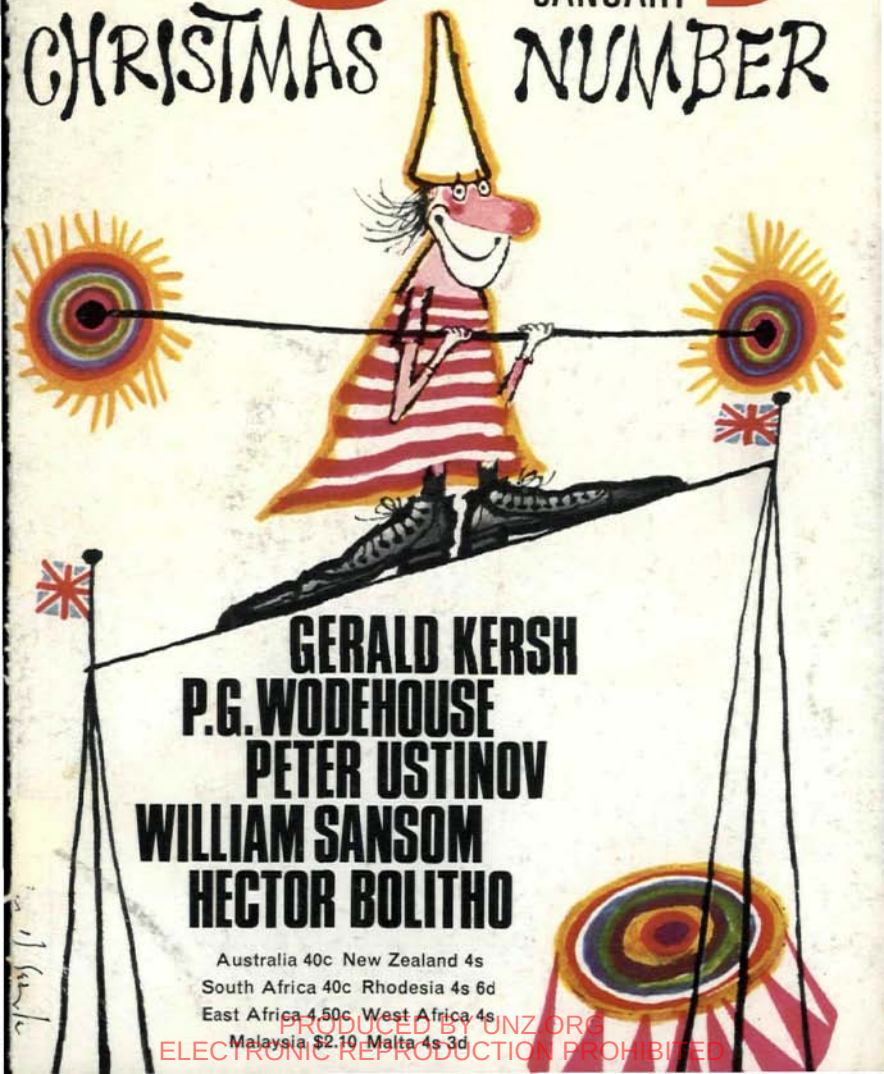

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BY P.G. WODEHOUSE

JEEVES AND THE GREASY

AS I closed the front door behind Aunt Dahlia, whom I had been entertaining to lunch at the Wooster apartment, I had rather the feeling you get when parting company with a tigress of the jungle or one of those fiends with hatchet who are always going about the place slaying six. This aunt is my good and deserving aunt and as a rule as genial a soul as ever downed a veal cutlet, but she's apt to get hot under the collar when thwarted, and in the course of the meal which had just concluded I had been compelled to thwart her like a ton of bricks. It was with quite a few beads of persp bedewing the brow that I went back to the dining-room where Jeeves was cleaning up the debris.

"Jeeves," I said, brushing away the b. of p. with my cambric handkerchief, "you were offstage towards the end of lunch, but did you happen to drink in any of the conversation that was taking place?"

"From time to time fragments of it penetrated to me in the kitchen, sir. Mrs. Travers has a robust voice. I received the impression that she was incensed."

"She was. And why? Because I stoutly refused to portray Santa Claus at the Christmas orgy she's giving at her rural residence to the children of the local yokels. She kept trying to bend me to her will, but she ought to have known that argument would be fruitless. As the wise old saying has it, you can take a horse to the water, but you can't make it put on white whiskers and go around saying 'Ho-ho-ho'."

"Very true, sir."

"You think I was justified in being adamant?"

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BIRD

"Fully justified, sir."

"Thank you, Jeeves."

I must say I thought it pretty decent of him to give the young master the weight of his support like this, for only that morning I had had to thwart him as inflexibly as I had thwarted the recent aunt. He had been trying to get me to go to Florida after Christmas, because he likes the fishing there and yearns someday to catch a tarpon. Well, I sympathised with his hopes and dreams, but I particularly wanted to be in London for the Drones Club darts tournament, which comes on in February, so I said Florida was out. And the point I'm making is that he might quite easily have exhibited umbrage or dudgeon or whatever you call it when somebody looks puff-faced, but he didn't, and I honoured him for this display of the feudal spirit.

I don't know if it's the same with you, but I've always found, after emerging victorious from a battle of the wills, that I get a touch of remorse and feel I ought to do something to bind up the wounds of the poor slob I've had to crush beneath the iron heel, so now it seemed to me that it would be a graceful act to blow a few bob on flowers for Aunt Dahlia. An olive branch, you might call it, or possibly the *amende honorable*. Luncheon digested, accordingly, I trickled off in quest of the blooms, and I was approaching her door with them, when who should I see legging it up the steps but Madeline, only daughter of Sir Watkyn and the late Lady Bassett, and I halted abruptly, as though I was about to stub my toe on a scorpion.

This Bassett is a girl I particularly dislike, and owing to an

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unfortunate misunderstanding too complicated to go into, she is under the impression that I'm pining away for love of her, and she has constantly assured me that, should anything occur to cause her to sever relations with her current betrothed, a tough egg of the name of Roderick Spode, she will switch to me and, as she puts it, make me happy. So naturally it is my unswerving policy to steer clear of her as far as possible. I abandoned, accordingly, my plan of going in and delivering the olive branch, and after an hour or two at the Drones, brushing up my darts game, I returned to *chez* Wooster. And I had scarcely placed umbrella in stand when the phone rang. It was Aunt Dahlia.

"Bertie?"

"Hello, aged relative."

"I hope you thoroughly understand that after your craven exhibition at lunch I'm not speaking to you."

"Oh, aren't you?"

"Certainly not. I'm treating you with silent contempt. But, after all, you are my late brother's son whom I frequently dandled on my knee as a baby, and a sub-human baby you were if ever I saw one, though I suppose you were more to be pitied than censured if you looked like a ventriloquist's dummy. So when I see you waist-high in the soup and likely to sink without a trace at any moment, my humane instincts come uppermost, I remember that I am an aunt, and I tell myself that I can't let you go unwarned. Weak of me, of course, but there it is."

"Very creditable," I said, though wishing she could make it a bit clearer. She seemed an aunt who spoke in riddles.

"Madeline called this afternoon."

"Yes, I observed her crossing your threshold. I was on my way to bring you a few long-stemmed roses."

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"You and your long-stemmed roses! It would take more than long-stemmed roses to change my view that you're a contemptible cowardy custard and a disgrace to a proud family," she said haughtily. "Your ancestors fought in the Crusades and were often mentioned in dispatches, and you cringe like a salted snail at the thought of appearing as Santa Claus before an audience of charming children who wouldn't hurt a fly. It's enough to make an aunt turn her face to the wall and give up the struggle. However, we threshed all that out at lunch, so I won't go into it now. You're wanting to hear about Madeline Bassett, so here it comes. She's broken her engagement!"

"What!"

"Yes, she has returned Spode to store and tells me she intends to call on you tomorrow afternoon around the hour of four. She predicted that after she's seen you and told you that your patient love is at last to be rewarded you will go singing about the Drones Club."

I tottered. "But this is frightful!"

"I thought it would make you sit up."

"What shall I do for the best?"

"Don't ask me. Ask Jeeves."

I did so without delay.

"I wonder if you could spare me a moment of your valuable time, Jeeves," I said. "A problem has arisen and I want your advice. I must begin by saying that it's one of those delicate problems where one can't mention names. You see what I mean?"

"I understand you perfectly, sir. You would prefer to term the protagonists A and B."

"Or North and South?"

"A and B is more customary, sir."

"Just as you say. Well, A is female, B, male, and owing to a concatenation of circumstances A has got it firmly into her nut that B's in love with her. But he isn't. He views her with concern. Now, until recently A was engaged to—"

"Shall we call him C, sir?"

"Caesar's as good a name as any, I suppose. Well, as I was saying, until quite recently A was engaged to Caesar and B hadn't a worry in the world. But now the fixture has been scratched and A is talking freely of marrying B, and what I want you to bend your brain to is the problem of how he can oil out of it. Don't get the idea that it's simple, because B is what is known as a *preux chevalier*, so when A comes to him and says, 'B, I will be yours,' he can't just say, 'You will, will you? That's

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what *you* think.' He has his code, and the code rules that he must kid her along and accept the situation. And frankly, Jeeves, he'd rather be dead in a ditch. Anything stirring?"

"Yes, sir."

I was astounded. This was certainly quick service.

"Obviously, sir, A's matrimonial plans would be rendered null and void were B to convey the impression that his affections were engaged elsewhere."

I began to see what he was driving at.

"You mean if I—or, rather, B—were to produce some female and assert that she was betrothed to me—or I should say B—the peril would be averted?"

"Precisely, sir."

I mused. "It's a thought, Jeeves, but there's a dickens of a snag—viz., how to get hold of the party of the second part. You can't rush about London asking girls to pretend they're engaged to you. At least, I suppose you can, but it would be quite a nervous strain."

"I would suggest that B apply to a theatrical agent, sir. Such a person would be in an admirable position to supply some resting artiste who would be glad to co-operate in an innocent deception in return for a moderate fee."

I slapped the brow.

"Jeeves," I ejaculated, if ejaculated is the word, "I believe you've hit it. Those theatrical agents assemble in gangs in the Charing Cross Road, don't they?"

"So I have been given to understand, sir."

"I'll tell B," I said, and bright and early on the following morning I might have been observed entering the premises of Jas. Waterbury in a dingy building about halfway up that thoroughfare.

The reason my choice had fallen on Jas. was not that I had heard glowing reports of him from every side, it was simply because all the other places I tried had been full of guys and dolls standing bumper to bumper and it hadn't seemed worth while waiting. Entering the lair of Jas. Waterbury, I found his outer office completely empty. It was as if he had parted company with the human herd. There was a door marked PRIVATE, and I rapped on it. I had not expected anything to start into life, but I was wrong. A head popped out.

It was what I would describe as a greasy head. Its upper slopes were moist with hair oil and the face, too, conveyed an impression of greasiness, as though its proprietor after the morning shave had thought fit to rub his cheeks with butter. But I am a

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broad-minded man and I had no objection to his being greasy, if he liked being greasy. Possibly, I felt, all theatrical agents are.

"Hello," said this oleaginous character. "Something I can do for you?"

"I want a girl."

"Don't we all? What's your line? Are you running a touring company?"

"No, it's more like amateur theatricals."

"Well, let's have the inside story, cocky."

He proved to be both quick and intelligent. He punctuated my narrative with understanding nods and when I had finished said I had come to the right man, for he had a niece called Trixie who would fill the bill to my complete satisfaction.

I pursed my lips a bit dubiously. I was asking myself if an uncle's love might not have made him give the above Trixie too enthusiastic a build-up.

"You're sure she'll be equal to the job? It calls for considerable histrionic skill. Don't you think we ought to have a seasoned professional?"

"Trix is a seasoned professional. Been playing fairy queens in panto for years. Never got a shop in London owing to jealousy in high places, but ask them in Leeds and Wigan what they think of her. Ask them in Hull. Ask them in Huddersfield."

I said I would, if I happened to come across them, and he carried on.

"Don't you fret yourself. Trix'll give you your money's worth. And talking of that, how much does the part pay?"

"I was thinking of a fiver."

"Make it twenty. That way you'll get every ounce of zest and co-operation."

I was in no mood to haggle. I dished out the twenty, told him to be at the Wooster residence at four on the morrow, complete with fairy queen, and, sure enough, at precisely that hour the front doorbell rang.

I answered it, for it was Jeeves' afternoon off. Once a week he downs tools at midday and goes to a butlers' club in Curzon Street. The Junior Ganymede, it's called, and he plays bridge there. I flung wide the gates and Jas. and his niece came in, and I started like a nymph surprised while bathing. For an instant you might say I was spellbound.

Not having attended the performance of a pantomime since childhood, I had forgotten how substantial fairy queens were, and the sight of Trixie Waterbury was like a blow from a blunt instrument. She stood about five feet eleven, and all of her that

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wasn't billowy curves was flashing eyes and gleaming teeth. It was some moments before I was able to say Good afternoon.

"Afternoon," said Jas. Waterbury. "This is Mr. Wooster, Trix. You call him Bertie."

The fairy queen said wouldn't "sweetie pie" be better, and Jas. Waterbury nodded approvingly.

"Much more box office," he agreed. "I told you she'd be right for the part, cocky. You can rely on her to give a smooth West End performance. When do you expect your lady friend?"

"Any moment now."

"Then we'd better dress the stage. You be sitting on his lap, Trixie."

"What!"

He seemed to sense the consternation in my voice, for he frowned a little under the grease.

"We're all working for the good of the show," he reminded me austerely. "You want the scene to carry conviction, don't you?"

I could see there was much in what he said. I sat down, and Wigan's favourite fairy queen descended on my lap with a bump that made the stout chair tremble like an aspen. And scarcely had she started to nestle when the doorbell rang. And who should come in but Roderick Spode, the last caller I was expecting.

This Spode is not one of my inner circle of buddies. From the outset of our acquaintance he has shown himself allergic to Woosters. Far too often he addresses me as "You worm" and on more than one occasion has expressed a wish to tear me into shreds with his bare hands. These things do not make for easy camaraderie.

"Oh, hello, Spode," I said. "Come along in. I don't think you've met Mr. Waterbury, have you? Mr. Spode, Mr. Jas. Waterbury. And Miss Trixie Waterbury, my fiancée."

Naturally Jas. Waterbury, having been anticipating the entrance of the female star and observing coming on left centre a character who wasn't a member of the cast at all, was disconcerted. He appeared to feel that as the act had been shot to pieces like this, there was no sense in hanging around.

"Well, Trix," he said, "your Bertie'll be wanting to talk to his gentleman friend, so give him a kiss and we'll be getting along." And with a greasy smile he led the fairy queen from the room.

Spode, who had been goggling from the outset, continued to goggle.

"What's all this, Wooster? Who on earth is that female?"

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"My fiancée. She plays fairy queens in pantomime."

"She looks like a hippopotamus."

"I suppose fairy queens have to, if they hope to get by in towns like Leeds and Huddersfield. Those audiences up north want lots for their money."

"You're really engaged to her?"

"Yes, all fixed up."

He snorted in a relieved sort of manner.

"Well, this will be good news for Madeline. She and I have had a complete reconciliation. Our engagement is on again, and the poor child was afraid to come and tell you herself. She said she couldn't bear to see the awful dumb agony in your eyes. She has such a tender heart. Gosh!" said Spode with all the polished tact I have learned to expect from him. "What a merciful escape she's had! Just imagine that sweet girl married to an ass like you! It doesn't bear thinking of."

He shuddered strongly and took his departure, leaving me, as I need scarcely tell you, feeling like a million dollars and in a mood to do spring dances all over the apartment. It was as if a great weight had rolled off me. Well, it had of course in one sense, for the fairy queen must have clocked in at fully twelve stone ringside, but what I mean is that a colossal burden had been lifted from the Wooster soul. The storm clouds had called it a day and the sun had come smiling through.

The only thing that kept joy from being absolutely unconfined was that Jeeves wasn't there to share my hour of triumph. I

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felt I had to tell the good news to someone, and the thought of Aunt Dahlia presented itself. True, we had parted on steamed-up terms, she foaming at the mouth, self-wet with honest sweat, but it might be that by this time she had come off the boil, so I commended my soul to God, left a note for Jeeves saying where I'd gone and hared off to her address in a swift taxi.

My hardihood was rewarded. I don't say her face lit up when she saw me, but she didn't throw the Perry Mason she was reading at me and she only called me two new names, so I felt that the atmosphere, if not one of the utmost cordiality, was near enough to it for me to spill the good news, and I was about to do so when the telephone rang. The instrument was on a table near her chair, and she reached for it.

"*Who?*" she boomed. She handed me the receiver. "One of your foul friends wants you. Says his name's Waterbury."

Jas. Waterbury, placed in communication with me, seemed perplexed. In rather an awed voice he asked:

"Where are you, cocky? At the zoo?"

"I don't follow you, Jas. Waterbury."

"A lion just roared at me."

"Oh, that was my aunt."

"Sooner yours than mine. I thought the top of my head had come off."

"She has a robust voice."

"I'll say she has. She could make a good living as a barrow boy. Well, cully, I'm sorry I had to disturb her at feeding time, but I thought you'd like to know that Trix and I have been talking it over and we both think a simple wedding at the registrar's would be best. No need for a lot of fuss and expense. And she says she'd like Brighton for the honeymoon. She's always been fond of Brighton."

I was at something of a loss to know what on earth he was talking about, but reading between the lines, I gathered that the fairy queen was thinking of getting married. I asked if this was so, and he chuckled greasily.

"You will have your joke, Bertie. You know she's getting married."

"I hadn't a notion. Who to?"

"Why, who else but you? Didn't you introduce her to your gentleman friend as your fiancée?"

"But that was just a ruse. I'm sorry, Jas. Waterbury, but you'll have to break it to Miss Waterbury that those wedding bells will not ring out."

"You don't want to marry Trix?"

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"I wouldn't marry her with a barge pole."

An astonished "Lord love a duck" came over the wire.

"If that isn't the most remarkable coincidence," said Jas. Waterbury. "Those were the very words employed by two other fellows, one in Hull and the other in Leeds, when refusing to marry Trix after announcing their betrothal before witnesses. Shows what a small world it is. 'Well,' I said to them, 'if that's your attitude, I suppose we'll have to put it on a business basis. You've heard of breach-of-promise actions,' I said to them. They were both gentlemen in every sense of the word and they quite realised that it was their duty to see that Trix got her little bit of heart balm, because there was her despair and desolation to be taken into account, and after a certain amount of argle-bargle back and forth we settled on two thousand quid apiece. And that's what I'd advise doing in your case. I can talk Trixie into accepting that.

"Nothing, mind you, will ever make life seem anything but a dreary desert for her now she's lost you, but two thousand quid will help. I'll come and see you tomorrow."

I would have preferred, of course, after this exceedingly unpleasant conversation to have gone off into a quiet corner and sat there with my head between my hands, but Aunt Dahlia was now making her wish for explanatory footnotes so manifest that I had to give her my attention. In a broken voice I supplied her with the facts and was surprised to find her sympathetic and understanding.

"There's only one thing to do," she said. "Ring Jeeves up and tell him to come here at once."

"He won't be home yet. He's playing bridge at his club."

"Give him a buzz, anyway."

I did so, and was surprised when I heard a measured voice say, "Mr. Wooster's residence."

"Why, hello, Jeeves," I said. "I didn't expect you home so early."

"I left in advance of my usual hour, sir. I did not find my bridge game enjoyable. The Duke of Hammersmith's butler twice took me out of business doubles and I had not the heart to continue."

"Well, will you hasten to Aunt Dahlia's place. Your presence is sorely needed."

"Very good, sir."

"Is he coming?" said Aunt Dahlia.

"Like the wind. Just putting on his bowler hat."

"Then you pop off."

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"You don't need me for the conference?"

"No."

"Three heads are better than two."

"Not when one of them is solid ivory from the neck up," said the aged relative, reverting to something like her customary form.

I slept fitfully, as the expression is, that night. It was past eleven when I presented myself at the breakfast table.

"I take it, Jeeves," I said as I started to pick at a moody kippered herring, "that Aunt Dahlia has told you all?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Travers was most communicative."

"My predicament is . . . how would you put it?"

"One of some gravity, sir."

I leaped from the table, the kippered herring frozen on my lips. The front doorbell had rung.

"Here he is, Jeeves!"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't possibly face him as early in the morning as this."

"In that case it might be advisable, sir, if you were to conceal yourself while I conduct the negotiations. Behind the piano suggests itself as a suitable locale."

To say that I found it comfortable behind the piano would be to deceive my public, but I secured privacy, and privacy was just what I was after. The facilities, too, for keeping in touch with what was going on in the great world outside were excellent. I heard the door opening, and then Jas. Waterbury's voice.

"Wooster in, cocky?"

"No, sir, he has just stepped out."

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"That's odd. He was expecting me."

"You are Mr. Waterbury?"

"That's me. Where's he gone?"

"I think it was his intention to visit his pawnbroker, sir."

"What!"

"He mentioned something about hoping to obtain a few pounds on his watch."

"Are you kidding? What's he want to pop his watch for?"

"Mr. Wooster's means are extremely straitened."

"You mean he's broke?"

"One might certainly describe him as fiscally crippled."

Jas. Waterbury's voice had a sort of tremolo in it, as if he'd just begun to realise that life wasn't the thing of roses and sunshine he'd been supposing it. I knew how he must be feeling. There is no anguish like that of the man who, thinking he has found the pot of gold behind the rainbow, suddenly learns from a reliable source that he hasn't, if you know what I mean.

"But how can he be broke? He slipped me twenty quid yesterday."

"Mr. Wooster is generous to a fault."

"And what about this place of his?"

"Sir?"

"He didn't get this for nothing. And you don't get a valet for nothing."

"Sir?"

"You're his valet, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, sir. His aunt, Mrs. Travers, supposes me to be holding that position, but I represent Messrs. Wilson and Bunting, wine merchants, goods supplied to the value of three hundred and four pounds, fifteen shillings and elevenpence, a bill which Mr. Wooster is unable to settle. I am what is technically known as the man in possession."

"You mean you're a broker's man?"

"Precisely, sir."

"You don't look like one."

"No, sir?"

"Or talk like one."

"There is a ready explanation, sir. I was at one time a gentleman's personal gentleman, but I am sorry to say I have come down in the world and my present situation was the only one I could secure. But while not what I have been accustomed to, it has its compensations. Mr. Wooster is a very pleasant young gentleman and takes my intrusion in an amiable spirit. Our relations have indeed become so cordial that he has confided his

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financial position to me. It appears that he is entirely dependent on the bounty of his aunt, a Mrs. Travers, a lady of uncertain temper who has several times threatened, unless he curbs his extravagance, to cancel his allowance and send him to Canada on a small monthly remittance. Should she learn of my official status and the reason for my being here, I do not like to envisage the outcome."

There was another pregnant silence, occupied, I should imagine, by Jas. Waterbury in wiping his brow.

Finally he said, "Gorblimey!"

He may have been intending to amplify the remark, but, if so, the words were dashed from his lips. There was a sound like a mighty rushing wind and I became aware that Aunt Dahlia was with us. As the bell hadn't rung, I took it that in letting Jas. Waterbury in Jeeves must have omitted to close the door.

Her eye seemed to have passed lightly over Jas. Waterbury, for it was to Jeeves that she addressed herself.

"Jeeves," she boomed, "can you look me in the face?"

"Certainly, madam, if you wish."

"Well, I'm surprised you can. I've just found out that you're a broker's man in valet's clothing. Can you deny it?"

"No, madam. Concealment, I fear, is useless. I represent Messrs. Wilson and Bunting, wines, spirits and liqueurs supplied to the value of three hundred and four pounds, fifteen shillings and elevenpence."

"Good God! What does young Bertie do—bathe in the stuff? Three hundred and four pounds, fifteen shillings and elevenpence! And in the red to that extent he's planning, I hear, to marry the fat woman in a circus."

"A portrayer of fairy queens in pantomime, madam."

"Same thing. I know those fairy queens. Starchy foods and stout in the dressing room. Roderick Spode says she looks like a hippopotamus."

I couldn't see him, but I imagine Jas. Waterbury drew himself to his full height at this description of his flesh and blood. No uncle likes criticism directed at a niece's *embonpoint*. When he spoke, his voice was stiff and offended.

"That's my niece you're talking about. And he's going to marry her or else get sued for breach."

It's just a guess, but I think Aunt Dahlia must have drawn herself to her full height, too. For the first time, she seemed to recognise that Jas. was among those present.

"Who are you?"

"Waterbury's the name."

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"This fairy queen is your niece?"

"That's right, and she's engaged to Wooster. He announced it before witnesses."

"And she thinks of suing him for breach of promise?"

"That's right."

"Well, she'll have to go to Canada to do it, because that's where Bertie Wooster'll be off to on the next boat. And he won't have money to throw away on breach-of-promise actions. It'll be as much as he can do to keep body and soul together on what I'm going to allow him. If he gets a meat meal every third day, he'll be lucky. You tell that niece of yours to forget Bertie and go and marry the demon king."

Experience has taught me that except in vital matters like playing Santa Claus at Christmas parties, it's impossible to defy Aunt Dahlia, and apparently Jas. Waterbury thought the same, for a moment later I heard the front door slam. He had gone without a cry.

Aunt Dahlia spoke:

"These emotional scenes take it out of one, Jeeves. Can you get me a drop of something sustaining?"

"Certainly, madam."

"How was I? All right?"

"Superb, madam."

"I think I was in good voice."

"Very sonorous, madam."

"Well, it's nice to feel that our efforts were crowned with success. This will relieve young Bertie's mind. I use the word mind loosely. When do you expect him back?"

"Mr. Wooster is in residence, madam. You will find him behind the piano."

I was already emerging, and my first act was to pay them both a marked tribute. Jeeves accepted it gracefully, Aunt Dahlia with a snort.

"Easy enough to hand out the soft soap, young Bertie, but what I'd like to see from you is less guff and more action. If you were really grateful, you would play Santa Claus at my Christmas party."

I could see her point. It was well taken. I clenched the hands. I set the jaw. I made the great decision.

"Very well, aged relative."

"You will?"

"I will."

"That's my boy. What's there to be afraid of? All those kids'll do is rub chocolate on your whiskers."

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"Chocolate?" I said in a low voice.

"Or strawberry jam. Pay no attention, by the way, to stories you may have heard of them setting fire to the curate's beard last year. It was purely accidental."

I had begun to tremble, again like an aspen, when Jeeves spoke, "Pardon me, madam."

"Yes, Jeeves?"

"If I might offer the suggestion, I think that perhaps a maturer artist than Mr. Wooster would give a more convincing performance."

"Don't tell me you're thinking of volunteering?"

"No, madam. The artist I had in mind was Mr. Spode. He has a fine presence and a somewhat deeper voice than Mr. Wooster. His Ho-ho-ho would be more dramatically effective, and I am sure that if you approached her, Miss Bassett would persuade him to undertake the role."

Aunt Dahlia pondered.

"I believe you're right, Jeeves. I'll go and see her now. It's tough on those children, for it will mean robbing them of the laugh of a lifetime, but they can't expect life to be one round of pleasure."

She exited smiling, and I turned to Jeeves, deeply moved. He had saved me from the fate that is worse than death, for I hadn't believed for a moment the aged r.'s story of the blaze in the curate's beard being an accident. The younger element had probably sat up nights planning it out.

"Jeeves," I said, "you were saying something not long ago about pushing off to Florida after Christmas."

"It was merely a suggestion, sir."

"You hope to catch a tarpon, do you not?"

"I confess that it is my ambition, sir."

I sighed. It wasn't so much that it pained me to think of some tarpon, perhaps a wife and mother, being jerked from the society of its loved ones on the end of a hook. What gashed me like a knife was the thought of missing the Drones Club darts tournament, for which I would have been a snip this year. But what would you do? I fought down my regret.

"Will you see to booking the tickets. We might leave directly after Christmas."

"Very good, sir."

I struck a graver note.

"Heaven help the tarpon that tries to pit its feeble cunning against you, Jeeves," I said. "It will be a one-sided contest."

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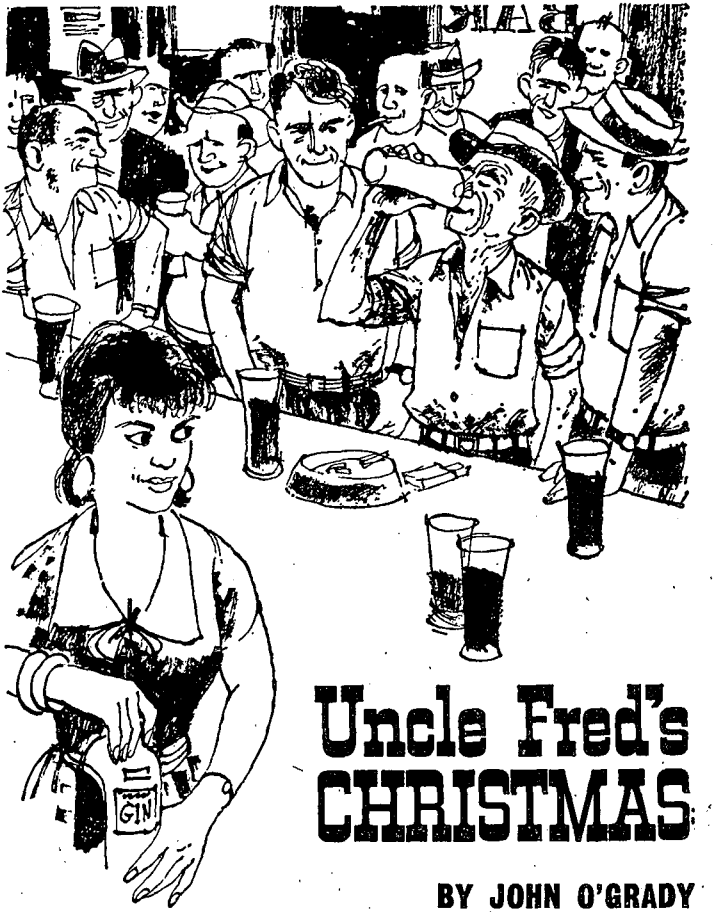

Uncle Fred's CHRISTMAS

BY JOHN O'GRADY

UNCLE FRED was a character. They reckoned he was two days older than the old gum tree in the bottom paddock, and nobody knew how old that was. He was as lean as a whip-handle, and twice as springy. If he had any affection left in the work-pump he called his "ticker" he gave it all to his horses. Certainly not to his two sons, although they had plenty for him. They worked as hard as his horses, but he'd been heard to say, "Any one o' me nags is worth both

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of 'em." He was the only one in the district with horses. Everyone else had cars and trucks.

Whenever he came into town, which was once a month, he rode in a sulky behind Old Maggie, a bay mare supposed to be nearly as old as he was. She was fat and patient, and named after his dead wife. He always left the boys behind on these trips.

"Town's no place for young 'uns," he'd say.

The "young 'uns" were six-foot bachelors in their thirties. We used to see them occasionally—at the Hospital Ball, and at the saleyards, and when they brought the wheat in. Uncle Fred was always with them, and hustled them home early. He'd allow them one beer each at the pub, and have one himself. They were good-looking blokes, and all the girls were after them, partly because the were good-looking, and partly because Uncle Fred couldn't live for ever, and his farm was a good one. It was noticed, on his monthly visits to the bank, that the manager always came out of his office to shake hands and talk to them. Nobody ever saw Uncle Fred going into the office to see the manager.

There's always somebody in a town who thinks the worst of people, and we had a few like that. They used to say the boys were only hanging around waiting for the old bloke to die, so they could get his farm and his bank balance. But if you asked them why they put up with him, they'd look surprised. "Who else is there to look after him?" they'd say.

If you asked Uncle Fred why he kept them on the farm, *he'd* look surprised. "What else c'n a man do?" he'd say. "Poor little blighters've got no mother."

There never was any argument when he said, "Time to be gettin' along." They'd just grin at anybody who happened to be around, say, "So long," and climb into the sulky with him.

Being big blokes, they used to sit one on each side of the old man for balance. Old Maggie would grunt, and slowly get up to her top speed of six miles per hour. And we'd watch their backs until they disappeared over the railway, behind the pepper trees. They'd never look back.

One time they persuaded Uncle Fred to buy a utility truck. We never did find out what arguments they used, but he walked into the agent's one Saturday morning, and bought one.

"Just wrote out a cheque for the full amount," the agent said. "As though it was only thirty bob."

Uncle Fred sent the boys home with Old Maggie—who wasn't so old then—and he had two more beers to celebrate.

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We never did find out where he learned to drive, either. But the sergeant thought he was good enough for a licence.

Driving himself home, he went smack into a tree. He didn't get hurt, but the truck did. Uncle Fred left it there, and walked home. The next Saturday he told the agent to go and collect it. "Fix 'er up an' sell 'er," he said. "Reckon I'll lose a few quid on 'er, but yer gotta pay for yer experience."

"You won't lose," the agent told him. "The insurance'll pay for the repairs. She'll be as good as new."

"Sell 'er," Uncle Fred said. "Man should've known better. Thing's no bloody good. Go to sleep an' she climbs a tree. Never 'ad that 'appen with Old Maggie. Go to sleep an' she takes yer home. Them thingsa got no brains at all."

The agent couldn't persuade him to change his mind, and the boys had to go back to riding in the sulky with him. If they were disappointed, they never showed it.

Christmas Eve Uncle Fred used to give them a cigar each, and allow them to have three drinks. Old Maggie got a glass of beer then, too, mixed with water in the pub bucket. They'd come to town before lunch, and eat steak and eggs at the Greek's. Then they'd spend the afternoon looking at the window displays in the stores and the newsagent's before having their three drinks, and jogging home about sundown in a cloud of cigar smoke.

Until last Christmas.

Last Christmas Eve there was a big crowd in town, what with all these New Australians, and the rain that started early in the morning so no-one could do any work on the farms. Uncle Fred reckoned it reminded him of the time he was down in Sydney.

Being such a little bloke, he was having trouble getting along. One of the boys started walking in front to clear a track for him, with the other one close behind the old man to stop the crowd from squeezing in on him too soon. They steered him to the store where they usually bought the cigars, and got him up to the counter. Then they backed off into the crowd, and ducked out.

Uncle Fred spent a couple of hours looking for them, getting shirtier all the time, and using his bony elbows on the New Australians. But they were a happy mob at that time of the day, and none of them objected. He stuck his head into the pub a couple of times, but none of us told him we'd seen them heading up towards the hospital. Although we were all talking about it.

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They showed up eventually, and everybody made room for them in their usual corner, and they bought themselves a couple of beers. This had never happened before, and we asked them where they'd got the money. But they wouldn't say.

So we left them alone, but we kept watching the door, waiting for the fireworks to start when Uncle Fred turned up. In the meantime, they were whispering to the barmaid, and she was having a bit of a giggle, but we couldn't hear what it was all about. She spotted the old man first, and whizzed their glasses away, so by the time he got to them they were standing there innocently as though they'd been waiting for hours.

"Where yer been, Pop? We been lookin' everywhere for yer."

"An' I been lookin' everywhere for you. What happened to yez?"

"Nothin' happened to us. We were lookin' at some rifles, an' when we turned around you was gone. Did yer get the cigars?"

"Yeah. I got 'em."

He handed them out, and they said, "Thanks, Pop."

"Three beers," Uncle Fred said to the barmaid. "Quick as yer can. We gotta be gettin' along."

"Yeah," they said. "It's gettin' late. You better give Old Maggie hers first, Pop. She takes longer to drink it than we do."

"Give us Old Maggie's first," Uncle Fred told the barmaid.

She pulled a beer and put it in the bucket and passed it over the bar to him, and he went out the back way. We knew he'd fill it with water from the tap out in the yard, and pat Old Maggie's nose and talk to her for a minute until she started nuzzling the bucket.

Then we found out what the whispering was about.

When Uncle Fred came back and picked up his glass and said, "Merry Christmas," he didn't know it was half full of gin. There wasn't an eye in the bar that wasn't watching him as he took his first swallow. Except his two sons. They should have been on the stage. They just said, "Merry Christmas, Pop," and drank as though the roof was not going to fall in any minute.

And as a matter of fact, it didn't. Uncle Fred just said, "Damn good beer, that. Better than last time." He emptied his glass, and said, "Come on, we can't stand here all day. Get the next one into yer."

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One of the boys said he'd seen a couple of New Australians hanging around the pub yard, and he hoped Old Maggie was all right. That was enough to start Uncle Fred worrying, so he put his money on the bar and went out to have a look. And his second beer was half gin, too.

The third one got laced when he was looking for a bit of grit in his other son's eye.

"Dunno what yer'd do without me," he said. "Get yerselves lorst. Get grit in yer eyes. Must've been only a bit o' dust—there's nothing there now."

He was wrong. There was the beginning of a worried look. And when he'd had the third drink, and said, "Come on. Time to be gettin' along," the worried look was there for everybody to see.

We weren't worried, but we were certainly surprised. He wished us "Merry Christmas" as though he'd only drunk straight beer. And the boys didn't look very happy as they followed him out.

We were all laughing about it, and wondering what they were up to, when they came back again, looking pleased with themselves.

"What room is it?" they asked the barmaid.

"Number seven," she said. "How far did you get?"

"Only to the railway line," they said. "Good stuff, that."

Some of us went out to have a look, and saw them carrying Uncle Fred up the back stairs. He was snoring as they carried him.

Then they came back down and got into the sulky and drove off to the produce store, and came back with half a bag of chaff. They unyoked Old Maggie, and put her in one of the garages with the chaff to keep her happy. Then they came back into the bar.

They reckoned they'd have another couple of beers before they went.

We asked them where they were going, but they wouldn't tell us. They said to the barmaid, "Give us a ring if he wakes up."

And they went out the front way.

The barmaid told us they were going to the nurses' party up at the hospital. That gave us something to talk about until closing time, at half-past six.

Being as it was Christmas Eve, the bar filled up again soon after half-past seven. So there were plenty of us to spot

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Uncle Fred when he came staggering down, swearing to himself.

The barmaid rang the hospital.

By the time the boys came tearing in, Old Maggie was back in the shafts. Uncle Fred wanted to know who put him in the pub room, and they told him he'd fainted on the way home, and they'd brought him back and got the doctor to him. They said the doctor told them it was nothing serious, but if he still felt sick when he came around, the best thing would be to give him a couple of beers, and take him home. They said the doctor reckoned he'd have a headache and a dry mouth, and beer was the best cure.

We could hardly keep from laughing at their innocent faces when they were telling him these lies. But he swallowed the story, and gave them a few bob to get him the beer.

This time they only got as far as the post office. So Old Maggie was unyoked again, and Uncle Fred put back in room seven, and the boys went back to the party. They reckoned he ought to keep for the rest of the night.

Room seven has a single bed and a double bed in it, and when the boys came back from the party, they both piled into the double bed and went to sleep. When they woke up, the old man was gone. So they came tearing down the back stairs, just in time to see him getting into the sulky.

"Hey," they said. "What's the big idea? 'We been lookin' after yer while yer was sick, an' now yer goin' home without us."

"Not goin' home," Uncle Fred said. "Goin' up to see the quack."

"Yer can't see 'im now. It's Christmas Day. He'll be in church."

"That's right, Pop," this bloke's brother said. "Seein' as we're in town, why don't we all go to church? An' see the quack later."

"I'm too sick to go to church," Uncle Fred said.

"The quack said if yer sick, we gotta give yer beer."

"Yer done that, an' I'm still sick."

"Maybe we didn't give you *enough* beer."

Uncle Fred thought about this. He thought they could be right.

"Stay there," they said. "We'll fix it."

They fixed it with four beers, each of them half gin. They didn't even get out of the pub yard.

Old Maggie was getting a bit fed up with being yoked and

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unyoked, but they put her back in the garage again, and put Uncle Fred to bed again, and went to church with two of the nurses. Then they went swimming with these two nurses down at the weir.

When they got back late in the afternoon, Uncle Fred was still out to it. So they went to tea up at the hospital.

It was on again when they came back to the pub after tea, and Uncle Fred was inclined to think the beer cure was no good. But they talked him into it, and he was flat on his back before they even got the harness on Old Maggie. She was now very fed up with the whole business. You could see it in her eye. She'd never been yoked up so many times and gone nowhere in her whole life before.

By this time, everybody in town knew what was going on, and we all reckoned they were being a bit hard on Uncle Fred. He hadn't had anything to eat since lunchtime the day before. So we told them, and it worried them a bit, but they said they couldn't do anything about it while he was unconscious. They said they'd feed him as soon as he woke up.

They went off again, and a couple of us followed them, and saw them pick up the two nurses and go walking with them up along the bank of the river.

We kept an eye on Uncle Fred, but he didn't wake up. He didn't wake up until Boxing Day. And when he did, the boys were asleep after their late night, and it was too early for any of us to spot him yoking up Old Maggie again and heading for home.

The first one to spot him was the gate-keeper at the railway crossing. He shut the gates against him, and rang the pub.

So the boys got dressed in a hurry, and tore along to the railway crossing, and tried to persuade him that he needed more beer. But he wouldn't be in it. He said the quack was mad. He said the best cure for his trouble was to go home and have a good feed and a good sleep.

They couldn't talk him out of it, so they had to climb into the sulky with him. The gate-keeper says that when they got in, they lit up their cigars, and drove off in a cloud of smoke without looking back.

There's real trouble out at Uncle Fred's place now, though. The boys want to marry the two nurses from the hospital. Old Alec, who's got the next farm, says you can hear him roaring right over at his place, even against the wind.

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PETE'S festive

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follies

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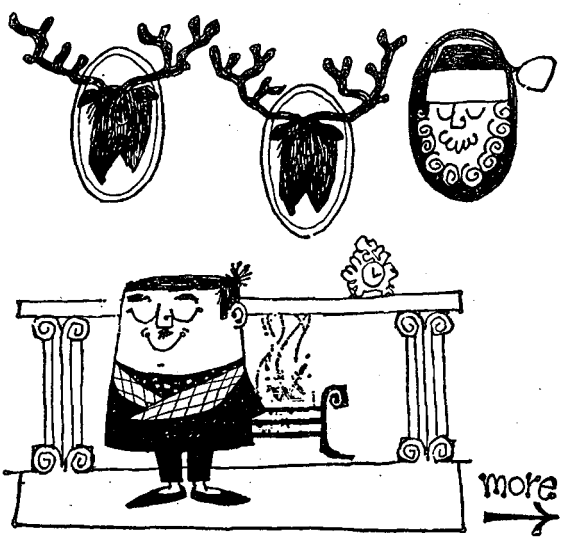

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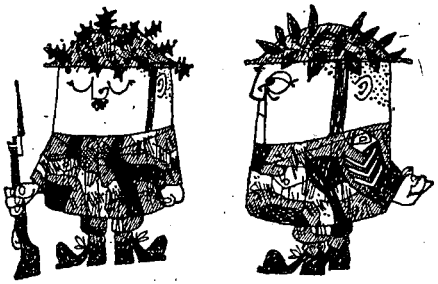

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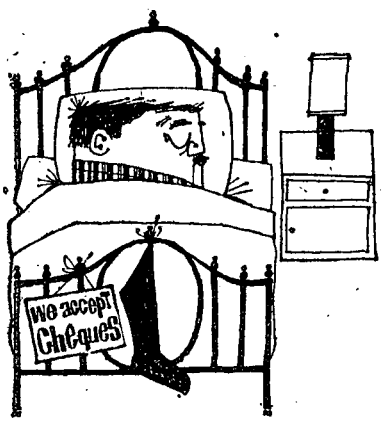

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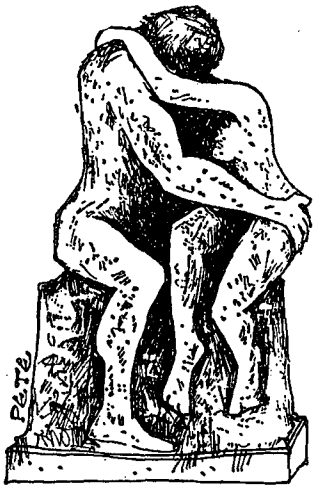

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TEMPEST IN PARADISE

by Hugh B. Cave

FOR the guidance of humanity, one way or another, someone's got to tell the story of little Evvy Potter and the Paradise Isle. My ship was the one that brought him back, so it's probably up to me, Martin Briggs, master of the *Tearii*.

It won't be easy. The facts are plain enough—Evvy is too honest to have held anything out—but when it comes to reckoning up the tally I'm a fathom or two out of my depth.

Where Everett Christian Potter originally came from I'm sure I don't know. Some say he was once a bank clerk down in Sydney. At the time of his sojourn in Paradise there was little enough about him to attract attention, Lord knows. Fifty-two years old, he stood five-feet-three on pigeon-toed flat feet, weighed less than eight stone, and was bald as a tern's egg.

He was an uncommonly mild little man, to be sure, but that's not surprising. Few of your genuine beachcombers are loud-voiced ruffians. Only the philosophers, the soft-eyed gentle ones, manage to make a conspicuous success of doing nothing.

Just before the first hurricane Evvy was living on the shore of Fakarava lagoon, in a house with a palm-thatch roof. It belonged to a minor chief there in the Dangerous Archipelago, so in a sense Evvy had gone native again. He did it often. But not even a chief has unlimited resources, and Evvy was anxious to get up to Takapoto where he had other friends. He was always worried about wearing his welcome thin.

He never *had* worn it thin, you understand. He was known all through the South Seas and could be sure of a meal and a bed almost anywhere. A drink, too, if he wanted one, though he seldom did. He was good company. He knew whole pages of Stevenson by heart and could play anything with cards from schafkopf to gin rummy. And patient! Why, he'd bend an ear to

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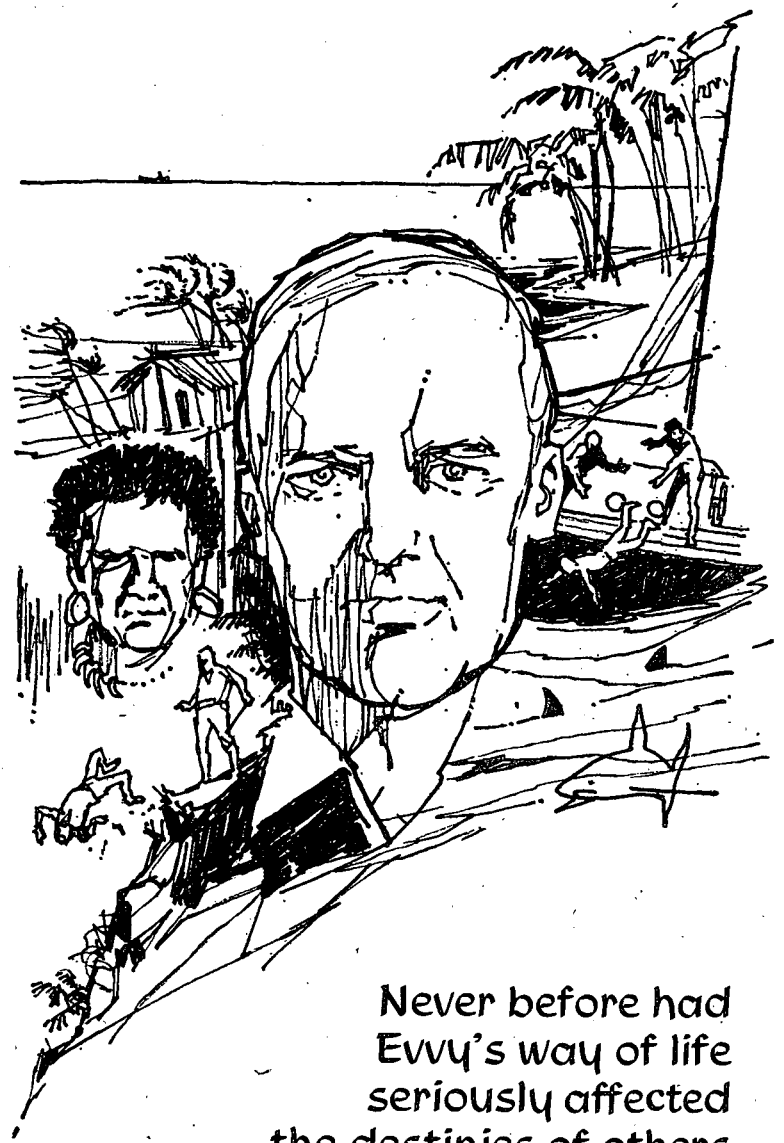

Never before had
Evvy's way of life
seriously affected
the destinies of others

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your every trouble the whole day long without even squirming.

But he never imposed.

The chief wanted him to stay, but Evvy was adamant. "I'm honoured and grateful," said he, "but I can't. With the fishing and crops so poor this season, and turtles scarce, it just wouldn't be right."

"How will you get to Takapoto?" he was asked.

"Oh, something will turn up. You'll see."

Something did, of course. Something always did. Put Evvy on a shingle in mid-ocean without food or drink, and you can bet your bottom dollar a submarine would surface at that very spot. This time it was the schooner *Sea Bird*, prowling the Archipelago for copra. Her captain knew Evvy well, though they had not met since '42 when Guadalcanal was a battlefield and Captain Denton was hauling PT boats off the coral with a beamy old Yippy. Evvy, then, had been something of a mystery, too old to fight—too much a pacifist anyway—but quite capable of prowling about on enemy-held islands, persuading the natives to co-operate.

"You do turn up in the damnedest places," Denton declared. He was a big, leaned-out man, an Australian, and he all but wrung Evvy's hand off. "Take you to Takapoto? Of course! Glad to have you. Be someone civilised to talk to, and I could do with a civilised shipmate, believe me. You'll see when you meet the two jokers I've got for crew." He shook Evvy's other hand for good measure. "But hell, you'll probably make bosom friends of 'em. You like anybody."

"It pays," said Evvy slyly.

"Nonsense. You'd like 'em if it cost you money."

So the *Sea Bird* sailed from Fakarava with Evvy aboard—sharing the captain's quarters, of course—and ran smack into the first of those two hurricanes. Screaming down from the north-west, through the Line Islands, it spread destruction from Manihi to Mururoa and littered the shores of the Low Islands with scraps of a vast marine jigsaw puzzle. John Denton's schooner was square in the path of it.

When the worst of the blow had roared on by, The *Sea Bird* lay somewhere between the Tuamotus and the Marquesas, a helpless hulk shorn of masts and wallowing rudderless in a wild green sea. The four men aboard her crept from the splinters to gaze in wonder on a sun they had never expected to set eyes on again.

"Evvy, m'lad," said Denton, "I'll wager you thought the pearly gates were open wide that time!"

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"I did, for a fact," confessed Evvy, still unsteady on his matchstick legs after fourteen hours of being whirled about like a bull-roarer.

"Scared, were you?"

Evvy gave the question some thought and shook his head. "No. Not really."

The captain chuckled. Being Australian, he was of course a fatalist. Besides, he'd served his apprenticeship in the China Sea, where a typhoon that leaves a sailing vessel afloat is dismissed as a mere breath of wind. But the two members of the *Sea Bird*'s crew, Boiselle and Sinnett, scowled at Evvy with dislike, and, guessing their opinion of him, Evvy hastened to add, "I believe in the Island, you see. I do. Firmly."

"Island?" croaked Sinnett. He was a scrawny wretch with hard mouth and accusing eyes, the sort who in earlier times would likely have wound up behind the grey walls of Ile Nou. "What island? Where?"

"Why," said Evvy, "the one we go to when the world's done with us, Mr. Sinnett."

At that the scowls of Sinnett and Boiselle deepened. Even John Denton fell back a step. No-one bothered to comment on Evvy's statement. A man who puts any stock in crazy native superstitions is crazy himself, and that's an end to it.

"I'd better see if there isn't something we can do to improve our chances," announced Captain Denton uncomfortably, and to hide his embarrassment he hurried below for his sextant.

Nothing could be done. Repairs were out of the question. The *Sea Bird* had not been the most seaworthy craft to begin with—what copra tramp is?—and now, rolling to her scuppers in the heavy swell, she was like an old woman reeling homeward after a night with the kava bowl.

She floated; that was all. Topside, nothing much remained intact except, by some miracle, her dinghy. The stump of her foremast, snapped off three feet above the deck, pointed idiotically over the side like a cannon aimed at the crests of the approaching waves. Her binnacle was gone. Her wheel was a pair of splintered spokes. In the cuddy, the threadbare linoleum heaved over sprung planks with every lurch of the ship.

"No better than a raft," sighed Denton. She was perhaps not as good as a raft in that restless sea, with the Dangerous Isles living full up to their reputation and the December weather apt to bare its teeth again any moment.

In any case, they could only sit and wait.

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The wind died presently and darkness settled like a black breath over the sea. In the morning the ship lay like a washtub on a millpond. Captain Denton, after a long look at their glittering prison, sat himself down by the foremast stump with his *Sailing Directions*, to hunt for some mention of a current that might possibly be expected to benefit them. Evvy was sitting there too.

Sinnett halted before them. "We've food enough to last just two days," he announced sullenly.

"I know," said Denton, glancing up.

"And water for less time than that. The storm stripped us."

"I'm aware of it."

"Well?"

"Cool off. We've a Buckley's chance, Sinnett. Ships do use these waters. We'll sit and hope for the best—unless you've a mind to try the dinghy, which to my way of thinking would be folly."

Muttering in his beard, Sinnett strode aft, where Boiselle awaited him. For a time the pair talked in undertones, with a glance now and then at Evvy. They were hardly the sort to appreciate Evvy's peculiar qualities.

By day's end Evvy's position had become downright awkward. The food and drink had been rationed, and, since he was not a paying passenger, every mouthful he downed was a gift, so to speak, from his three shipmates.

"Why should we share with you?" Boiselle demanded, his black eyes oddly bright. "What are you, after all? A beachcomber. A nothing. Name of God, what right have you to take food and drink from men who have earned it?"

"Enough of that," warned the captain.

"Boiselle's right," grumbled Sinnett, standing firm at his friend's side—a head shorter but the more aggressive, the more brutal of the two. "If he amounted to anything it might be different. But him! He'd settle for squatter's rights in a bush village if there was a free meal in it."

"Enough, I say!"

They subsided. The flicker in Denton's eye warned them it was best to. But off by themselves they continued to mumble and cast looks.

It was a strange position Evvy found himself in. Never before had his way of life seriously affected the destinies of others. Where people had liked him or been able to make use of his minor talents, he had lingered in good faith, being careful of course not to overdo it. When unwanted, he had passed on with

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a smile and a friendly wave. Here, he was in the way but could do little about it.

To be sure, he tried mightily the next day to add to the food supply by fishing. But though he sat bareheaded in the blaze of the sun for hours on end, patiently twitching a line up and down in the ominously calm water, nothing came of it.

Nothing, that is, but an opportunity to think the situation through and arrive at a conclusion.

He found Captain Denton in the cabin, poring over charts at the table.

"John," said Evvy quietly, "I'd like permission to take the dinghy and go my way."

"What?"

"Those two are right. I shouldn't be here."

The big Australian leaned back to glower at him. "You want to be put adrift in the tender to die of thirst, just because a pair of worthless bilge-rats don't have the decency to keep their mouths shut? Shades o' Bill Bligh! If I didn't know better, I'd say you were shikkered."

"If you please, John," said Evvy patiently.

"No!"

"Then I must refuse to share the food and water."

"You'll refuse nothing!" shouted Denton. "You'll take your fair part of what we've got if I have to upend you and spoon it in. Now clear out of here with your crazy notions. And if those two speak out of turn again, I'll have to deal with 'em as they deserve."

Evvy did not know what to do. Unhappily he pondered the one obvious solution, but suicide seemed a terribly violent thing and he disliked violence. He needn't have fretted. The decision was out of his hands. Before the day ended his fate was decided for him.

Sinnett and Boiselle, their backs to the setting sun, faced their skipper. Their minds were made up and they were armed. They had already swung the dinghy over the side.

"He goes," rumbled Boiselle. "We heard him. He wants to go and you'll not stand in the way of it, Captain. Careful now!"—as Denton seemed about to hurl himself at them—"These guns are loaded and we're not afraid to use them. Keep out of this or you'll take the consequences."

"Consequences! For this you'll hang!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. We're not fooling. Not any longer. *Mister* Potter—on your way!"

Evvy was the calmest man on that battered ship. Anyone

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who knows him would be certain of it. "I would like to shake the captain's hand," he said.

"No! Clear out!"

"Very well. Goodbye, John. Another time, perhaps." Evvy caught the skipper's eye and managed a smile. "Thank you for your kindness." Then over the rail he went without another word and took up the dinghy's oars. They were heavy oars, but in clumsy fashion he managed to put open water between him and the schooner.

Perhaps he should not have waved when Captain Denton turned to look at him. Had he not done so, the rage of the Australian might have remained under control. Then again, what happened was possibly inevitable, Boiselle and Sinnett being shrewd enough to foresee the outcome of their revolt if the tale were told.

At any rate, the sight of that forlorn figure in the rowboat burst the bonds of Denton's fury. The captain of the *Sea Bird* swung about and looked with loathing upon his two shipmates. Blind to the menace of their weapons, he strode steadily towards them.

They stood their ground and shot him.

Evvy saw them drag their captain to the side and thrust him overboard. That done, they looked across the darkening water at the small-boat and Boiselle raised his gun to take aim. But the other impatiently tugged him away.

So Evvy went on rowing. Steadily through that night, watched only by moon and stars, he struggled at the oars in an effort to increase the distance between himself and the murderers. Not that he feared dying. He expected to die. But he could not bear the thought of departing life within sight of those two wicked men.

In the morning, finding the horizon quite empty, he desisted and sat quietly to await the end. He could not fish. He had neither line nor bait. For a time he allowed his thoughts to dwell on his yearning for food and water. But as the day passed—an interminable day of still air and burning sunlight, unrelieved by a whisper of wind or the flutter of a sea-bird's wings—Evvy found that he did not crave food. The thought of it sickened him.

Water was what he wanted. Just the feel of it on his parched and swollen tongue. Just a drop on the blistered palms of his hands.

He looked longingly at the sky. Cloudless, it pulsed with heat, mocked him with its brilliance.

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He contemplated death. He was not afraid of it, but he was saddened to think there were so many beautiful things in life that he had taken entirely for granted. Things really precious beyond measure. His many friends. The lonely trader who so hugely enjoyed hearing about Conrad's Captain Lingard. The jolly missionary fellow over in Tonga who liked to play poker for matches, cheating as slyly as a Sydney professional and roaring with laughter when reprimanded for it. The curious little tykes in the Laus, pretending to be seized with stomach-ache so that he would stay and tell them stories.

So many good friends a man had if only he stopped to count them. And not the least, of course, had been Captain Denton. Through Evvy's head ran a tune he had often heard the captain singing. "But my auld mither dee'd in the year auchty-nine, and I ne'er hae had peace in the world sin syne . . ." He'd peace now, had John Denton. At a price.

Evvy thought of white coral beaches too, and the organ swell of surf on familiar island shores. Of afternoons spent dozing in the green shade of coco-palms. Of tea with a Mrs. Thompson, a governor's wife, and barbecued pig with wild bush natives in the hills behind Empress Augusta Bay, during the war. Not in a long time had he counted his blessings so conscientiously. The tally surprised him.

But it saddened him a little too.

He did not exactly lose track of time; rather he ignored it from the start, knowing that a mechanical count of the hours would only increase his suffering. Now and then he slept, but his sleep was fitful. Once when he awoke the stars seemed unusually bright and the sea gleamed softly with phosphorescence. "The souls of drowned men walk with torches under the water," Evvy thought, recalling an island legend he'd heard, and he wondered if John Denton had learned the secret. Again when he awoke the sun was directly overhead, focused on him as through a burning-glass, and the backs of his hands were covered with white blisters.

All the time, asleep or awake, Evvy grew weaker, and when the torment neared the point of being unbearable he clutched the gunnel of the boat and debated whether he should consign himself to the sea. But there are sharks in those waters. His chance of drowning before they discovered him was small. Better just lie still and wait. Be patient. Try again to think of the good things, so abundant in the life behind him.

But his thoughts wandered. He could not keep them in line. Just before the wind came, the advance breath of the second

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storm, he lay huddled in the bottom of the boat and dreamed of the Island.

Where had he first heard of the Island? Somewhere in the Low Archipelago, probably—in the southern atolls. Muratea, maybe, or Mururoa. Never mind; he believed it. Completely, he believed it. The natives who had told him about it were people he liked, and Evvy had tremendous faith in the wisdom of true friends.

There was an island somewhere to which the faithful were transported when their lives were finished. A peaceful place, all green and beautiful. A man could count on being welcomed there by friends who had gone before. In turn he would extend the hand of greeting to those who followed him. No-one hungered, no-one quarrelled. Violence was tabu.

Paradise Island!

There'd be no knowing exactly what happened to Evvy at this stage of his strange journey except that weather is recorded and dates can be verified. He knew nothing of the second hurricane, it's certain. Down it came on the heels of the first, threatening the Tuamotus anew but swerving to belabour the southern Marquesas and spend itself in the ocean to the east. Evvy dreamed on. He dreamed of his island, while the wind aroused the sleeping sea beneath him and bowled his boat along through the cataclysm.

He must have rattled about in his cockle-shell like a seed in a gourd, and at times been zipped through wind and rain with the speed of a Trobriander's fish-spear. But his mind had gone wandering and he remained oblivious to his predicament. This was a good thing, for he was too weak then to pull an oar in any case, and would only have been terrified by the upheaval.

Towards morning the rain revived him and he sat up. But he was only disturbed and disappointed. His mind was fixed on the one idea. There should be an island. Instead of this confusion of wind and rain and rushing sea, there should be a peaceful shore where good friends awaited him. How had it eluded him?

Then the night ended and he saw it, saw his island dead ahead against the bronze gleam of dawn in the east, and he was content. There loomed the green hills, breathtaking in their solid splendour. There the promised beach extended a white smile of welcome. Evvy took up an oar to steer with and let the swift sea carry him to his Paradise. Overhead, bosun birds spread their crimson feathers in welcome. All was well. Not for a moment, really, had he doubted.

He came ashore without accident at the south end of the beach

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and, refreshed as much by enthusiasm as by the cooling rain, managed to pull the dinghy up on the sand. Eagerly he looked about him. His island had an odd appearance of desolation, but that was an illusion, of course. He would find friends on it somewhere. Possibly some small detail of his arrival had gone wrong, and they were unaware that he had landed.

Nearly famished, he found a coconut palm behind the beach and knocked down some nuts by throwing sticks at them. He slept then. When he awoke, the storm had passed and the sun glowed above in a fine blue sky. The sea was only mildly boisterous.

Evvy stretched himself, drained a drinking nut, and set out to find his friends. Later on, he told himself, he would eat heartily. On such an island there would certainly be food to be found. But why should he exert himself to seach for it, when his friends would have a supply laid in?

To survey his Paradise he climbed over warm red rocks towards a dizzy cliff cleaving the sea like a ship's prow. As he climbed he sang, warbling a mission hymn in keeping with the solemnity of his surroundings and a jaunty fo'c's'le tune to indicate his light-heartedness. He would soon be playing pinochle again, with old Henry Dwyer, who had kept the store by the beach at Tetangi for so many years. Good old Henry. And he looked forward to sharing a bowl of kava with Chief Kahiko, drowned only a few months ago while turtle fishing. The chief had never finished that remarkable tale about the two young lovers who defied the tabu.

Evvy reached the top and looked down. Far below, to his right, lay the beach where he had come ashore. To his left the rocky wall of the island enclosed a tiny cove. When he saw what lay there the song died on his lips.

It was the mastless hulk of the *Sea Bird*, aground but rolling and lurching as the incoming swells burst against her. The *Sea Bird*, ominous reminder of things ugly and violent! A trespasser here. But worse—on the beach blazed a fire, and beside the burning coconut husks sat Boiselle and Sinnett.

Evvy knew better than to stand against the skyline where, chancing to look up, they might see him. He dropped to hands and knees in the tangled brush at the cliff's edge. There, his expectations shattered, he lay trembling.

Boiselle and Sinnett . . . Murderers! Even now they were arguing about something while they prepared a meal of landcrabs and shellfish over their fire. What right had they in Paradise? By what trickery had they discovered the way?

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Their presence was sacrilege. Yet here they were, and apparently here they meant to stay. Already they had built a shelter of saplings and palm leaves at the edge of the beach.

Another thought occurred to Evvy. He must hide his boat quickly, before the murderers of Captain Denton took a notion to explore the island. If they discovered the dinghy they would hunt him down like an animal. They would not rest until they had destroyed him, for he was the only witness to their crimes.

He scrambled back to the beach and dragged the dinghy deep into the undergrowth, carefully erasing any marks in the sand. The morning was well advanced by then and he was tired. His empty stomach was one great ache. But, despite his weariness, he had to climb to the cliff-top again to keep an eye on the intruders. There in the scrub at the cliff's edge, with the sea rumbling on the spray-soaked rocks below and the wind whistling about him, he spent the remainder of that dismal day and all the night that followed.

Now Evvy Potter was a peace-loving man if ever one lived, but the longer he crouched there in his lookout post, pondering what he should do, the more bitter he became. *Something* had to be done, that was certain. But what? Had Boiselle and Sinnett been ordinary men, Evvy almost certainly would have gone down and talked to them. Explained matters. Asked them in a nice way to take themselves elsewhere. But the peaceful approach was out of the question here. They were monsters, these two. They'd have to be driven out.

Evvy thought about it all night, and could discover only one solution. It staggered him. He abhorred violence in any form. But this was not his island. It belonged to good people who must be protected. And he alone knew what kind of men Boiselle and Sinnett were.

There was no way out of it. He was obliged to act.

In the morning, when the two men emerged from their lean-to, they conferred at some length on the beach. Then Boiselle, the stronger one, swung an axe to his shoulder. Evvy watched them walk along the sand to the base of the cliff. When they began to climb, he wriggled deeper into the brush.

They halted within ten feet of him.

"We must have a bed of quick-burning dry stuff first," said Boiselle. "Old palm leaves, if any are to be found up here. Then some heavy branches and logs that will burn a while."

"I say it's a waste of time," grumbled the scrawny Sinnett. "Who's to see it if we build it? Do the frigate birds know a signal fire when they see one?"

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Boiselle cursed him and strode away, the axe dangling from one big-knuckled fist.

Evvy watched, bewildered. To an ordinary castaway it must have been obvious what the men were doing. Not so to Evvy. A fire, yes—but what for? Why should they wish to signal anyone? Having attained Paradise, surely they had no desire to depart. What, then? He saw through it after a time, and the answer increased his alarm a hundredfold. They meant to summon others of their kind. Having thrust a foot in the door, they hoped to fling the barrier wide. Perhaps in their arrogance they even planned to drive the good people *off* the island and populate it with thieves and murderers.

If anything were needed to solidify Evvy's resolve, this was it.

Sinnett's job, evidently, was to gather the brush. When he had dropped four armloads of tinder in the designated spot, he paused to wipe his angry face, then sank to the ground at the edge of the precipice and gazed glumly out over the empty sea.

Evvy emerged at that moment from his place of concealment and stepped forward, his only weapon a long straight stick. The stealthy advance was a technique new to him, quite foreign to his nature. But he was a small man, naturally quiet, and managed it with no great difficulty. Behind the seated figure he halted, the stick gripped like a spear. His hands trembled only a little.

"Mr. Sinnett."

Sinnett turned a scowling face and bounded erect with a whistle of amazement. The stick leaped at him. He threw himself backward, snatching at his revolver. He cried out only once—at the moment when he felt empty space beneath him. As he tumbled to the rocks at the base of the promontory he was silent. And so was Evvy, bending over the cliff's edge to watch him.

Some distance away, among the trees, Boiselle's axe fell silent. "Something wrong?" Boiselle called. "What's up?" The shout startled Evvy and he darted back into hiding. When Boiselle came striding into view an instant later, the axe still gripped in his hand, Evvy was nowhere to be seen.

"Sinnett!" the big man shouted. "Where are you? What are you up to?" He turned to peer all about him.

From the thicket nearby appeared a strange sight: an advancing tangle of leafy branches that completely hid the identity of the man behind it.

"There you are," Boiselle grumbled. "Why can't you speak when a man calls?" With a snort of disgust he turned away, just as the oncoming heap of brush increased the speed of its advance —broke into a run, so to speak—and hurled itself straight at him.

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The big Boiselle saw quickly enough then that something was amiss, but not so quickly what to do about it. Against the bristling hedge of thorns in which he found himself struggling, his axe was useless. His gun he could not even reach. Like a fly battling a broom he stumbled back to the waiting edge of the precipice, one step, two steps, unable to halt himself. The third step carried him over.

Evvy emerged from behind his battering ram and looked down, his task finished. He had done it! Bested both of them! He, Evvy Potter, who never before had so much as wagged an angry finger at a fellow human. With a small sigh he turned away, free at last to seek out the friends he knew must be wondering what on earth was delaying him.

All the rest of that day Evvy searched for his friends, scarcely pausing to feed himself. But though the island was small and he covered all parts of it at least twice, he found nothing. A sad and bewildered man, he realised at last that he had better take up the pressing problem of survival, lest his days in Paradise be cut short.

So for the first time he made a fire, native fashion, with a rubbing stick and bits of coconut hair, and looked about for something substantial, such as breadfruit or taro, to augment his diet of fruits and berries. With his stomach attended to, he built himself a palm-thatch shelter in which to live.

The days passed and Evvy became aware of two important facts. First, he was alone on his island. Quite alone. Second, it was not at all the sort of place he had been told about. In simple truth it was about as far removed from the expected Paradise as it possibly could be.

Food was extremely hard to find. The entire island, it seemed, consisted of red volcanic rock which supported only a gnarled tangle of worthless scrub. A dozen poor coconut trees, a few hard-to-find clumps of elephant-eared taro plants, a little purslane, a solitary old pandanus leaning on a maze of taproots; these were about all the place offered. These and an unending swarm of savage little nono flies that gave him no peace. There was not even water, except the brackish stuff he could obtain by scooping a hole in the sand above the reach of the tide.

Life in Paradise was going to be difficult.

But he managed, subsisting mostly on fish and crabs. And one day, some two weeks after his arrival, the shadow lifted from his mind. Probably his mind had been struggling to free itself for some time, and sooner or later the veil of illusion would have

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dissolved anyway. As it happened, the transition came with dramatic suddenness. Evvy was wading among the rocks in the cove, hunting mussels. Hot and tired, he stumbled and fell sprawling in the cool water. For a moment he lay there enjoying a new, quite wonderful sensation of complete relaxation; then he stood up to wade ashore.

He halted. His gaze fell upon the forlorn shell of the *Sea Bird* and like a deflected spear, sped upward to the crest of the cliff. No more nonsense about Paradise. At that instant, with a mind as clear as the sky, Evvy knew where he was and what he had done. His heavenly isle was nothing more than a neglected bit of Pacific real estate. And he, Evvy Potter, disciple of the other cheek, had ruthlessly destroyed two human beings.

He wept.

Later, while sitting despondently before his lean-to, he made a half-hearted attempt to pull himself together and reckon his chances. He was probably in the Marquesas somewhere. Ships called at Hiva-oa and Nuku-hiva. Copra schooners sometimes visited the smaller isles of the group. Rescue was not an impossibility, if he could manage to stay alive while awaiting it.

But did he deserve to be saved? He didn't, of course. No room for argument there. The world would be better off without him. But he couldn't just lie down and die, either. So, after a fashion, he went on living. And after a time, the initial shock of truth having been blunted by days of loneliness, Evvy began to meditate.

Hold on now, said Evvy to himself. Just wait a minute. When you up and attended to those two murderers, you thought you were doing it to ensure peace in Paradise. That's a point worth pondering, Evvy Potter. You were out of your mind, or you'd never have thought this forsaken lump of rock *was* Paradise. You'd lost control of your faculties.

And who *did* control your faculties at that time? Why, said Evvy to himself, there's a question of tremendous importance. There's the crux of the matter. *Someone* did, for a certainty. A mind can't function by itself. There has to be someone, somewhere, to spin the wheels.

Who then? Who took over, Evvy asked himself, when the black wings were beating so loud that day in the *Sea Bird*'s dinghy? Who made you believe you'd arrived in Paradise and *directed* you, so to speak, to do what you did?

There were several possible answers. But only one of them, to Evvy's way of thinking, could properly fit his case. After all, he was a humble, Godfearing man.

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When he'd got his solution, he felt better. He classed himself then as a trusted emissary who'd been ordered to perform an unpleasant but necessary mission. He might even be entitled to a "well done" for his efforts. In the larger sense he was all at sea, though. The best part of his life had been devoted to turning his back on such assignments.

Despite his mental turmoil, he attended to the practical side. The signal fire on the cliff was completed, and daily he climbed to peer at the horizon. One day he saw a sail.

It was my copra boat, the *Tearii*, en route from Hiva-oa to the Tuamotus. Evvy lit his fire. He danced up and down on the edge of the cliff and waved his arms. He was rescued.

That, in a way, is the finish of Evvy Potter's remarkable story. A man is cast away on a bit of rock in the sea and is rescued. In the classic tradition, that ends it. But in Evvy's case there's a postscript. As master of the *Tearii* I'd known him for years, and the moment I put out a hand to help him over the side, I saw there'd been a change in him.

"You wriggle out of the oddest scrapes, Evvy," I said. "We thought you were done for when the *Sea Bird* failed to turn up."

Evvy looked back at his island for a moment; even climbed on a pile of empty copra sacks to see it better. Odd, the impression I got when he turned to confront me. You'd think a man would be aged by an ordeal such as he'd been through. But he seemed younger, straighter, more sure of himself than when I'd last seen him a year earlier on the quay in Papeete.

"Captain Briggs," said he firmly. "I'm convinced there's a place for men like me in this troubled world. I've had occasion to do some serious thinking on the subject."

"Meaning what?"

"Well—I doubt if you'd understand. I'm not sure I've got it straight myself yet. You see," said Evvy, "it came as rather a shock to me. I'm still a bit off balance."

He puzzled me. Maybe he *was* off balance. I thought so more than once when he was telling me the story of his voyage in the dinghy and his tussle with those two on the island. You'll trip on that tale the next time you tell it, I thought. Yet when he took pen and paper and set it down for submission to the proper authorities in Tahiti, not a detail was altered.

The day we stopped at Hao, an odd thing happened. We sailed in through Kaki Pass to anchor in the lagoon in front of Otepa Village, and the people, of course, paddled out to meet us in canoes loaded with copra. I had a passenger that trip, a trader

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from down Mangareva way—a Chinese, or anyway part Chinese, name of Tonga Sam. He'd been acting as supercargo, and at Hao he stood by the ladder weighing the sacks of copra, and the few bags of pearl shell, as they were brought aboard.

When the last of the load was on deck it was to Sam, not me, that one of the native boys slyly held out his upturned hand. In his palm lay some fair-sized pearls.

Tonga Sam grinned and said sure, he'd buy them. One by one he rolled them between thumb and finger, held them in the sun and appraised their value. "Give you a hundred francs," he said. "It's more'n they're worth, but I'm a generous man."

The boy hesitated. Maybe he knew the pearls were worth more; maybe he didn't. He did know that if he passed up Sam's offer he might have to wait weeks for another buyer. At length he nodded.

But right there Evvy Potter stepped forward and tapped Sam on the shoulder. "You're cheating," said Evvy.

Sam's mouth sagged with astonishment.

"They're worth twice that, at least," Evvy insisted. "What's more, you know it. Treat the boy fairly, sir, or you'll answer to Everett Christian Potter!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Sam sputtered.

Evvy didn't budge.

Well, it was too much for me. Anything at all can happen in the Dangerous Isles, but the sight of that mild little nobody telling Tonga Sam what to do—and expecting Sam to do it—was something I'd never thought to witness. Sam was twice the size of him. Sam could have turned him inside out, I expect, the way a native turns a squid.

But Evvy Potter stood his ground like a prophet of old, scowling through the white beard he'd grown in Paradise. It wouldn't have surprised me—or Sam either, I'll wager—to see lightning flash from his eyes and hear a clap of thunder rumble out of him.

In a kind of daze Sam counted out two hundred francs and watched the astonished boy scramble back into his canoe. I couldn't hold in any longer. I began to laugh.

Evvy turned on me. "Captain Briggs," he said with tremendous dignity, "this is no laughing matter. I'm a peace-loving man and now, by heaven, I intend to let everyone know it. You can put that," said Evvy, "in your log."

No doubt about it, Evvy Potter is going a long way. One way or the other.

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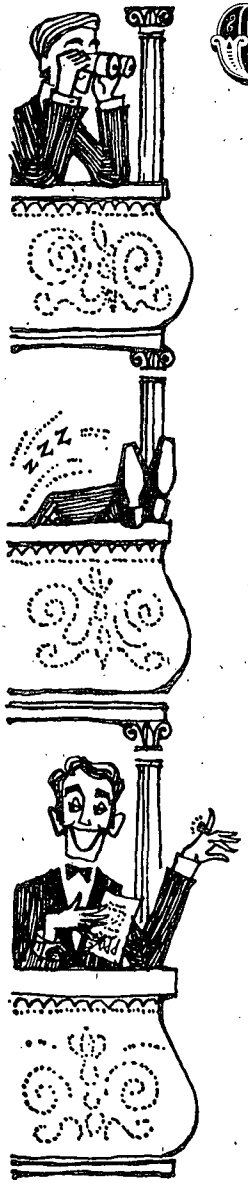

CURTAIN LINES

Dozing at a play, however refreshing, makes it a bit difficult to follow the argument on the stage, as occasionally the nap drags itself out into a couple of minutes and you awake to find a wholly fresh set of characters on the scene, or even a wholly fresh scene. This is confusing. It is therefore wise to have someone along with you who will alternate watches with you, dozing when you are awake and keeping more or less alert while you are dozing. In this way you can keep abreast of what has been happening . . . .

ROBERT BENCHLEY,
Sporting Life in America: Dozing

AT PLAY

"For my part," said Mr. Lovel, "I confess I seldom listen to the players; one has so much to do in looking about and finding one's acquaintance, that really one has no time to mind the stage. Pray," most affectedly fixing his eyes upon a diamond ring on his little finger, "pray, what was the play tonight?"

"Why, what the devil!" cried the Captain. "Do you come to the play without knowing what it is?"

"O yes, sir, yes, very frequently. I have no time to read playbills; one comes to meet one's friends, and shew that one's alive."

"Ha, ha, ha! and so," cried the Captain, "it costs you five shillings a night just to shew you're alive! Well, faith, my friends should all think me dead and underground before I'd be at that expense for 'em."

FANNY BURNEY, *Evelina*

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CROWD SCENE

In our assemblies at playes in *London*, you shall see suche heaving and shooving, suche ytching and shouldring, to sitte by women; Suche care for their garments, that they bee not trod on; Such eyes to their lappes, that no chippes light in them: Such pillowes to their backes, that they take no hurt: Such masking in their eares, I knowe not what: Such giving them Pippins to pass the time: Suche playing at foote Saunt without Cardes: Such tickling, such toying, such smiling, such winking, and such manning them home, when the sportes are ended, that it is a right Comedie, to marke their behaviour, to watche their conceites.

STEPHEN GOSSON, *The Schoole of Abuse*, 1579

What are the plays of today?
They're either so chock-full of intellect that they send you to sleep—or they reek of sentiment till you yearn for the smell of a cabbage.

ALFRED SUTRO, *The Man in the Stalls*

Command Performance

I was present one evening at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Tottenham Court Road, when H.R.H. the Duke of Gloucester, in a pit box, revealed the whole plot of a vaudeville which had amused him to the Duchess, whom he had brought to see it, as it progressed, in so loud a voice that he took the entire *parterre* into his confidence; the foreign portion of which, being unaccustomed to so peculiar a *programme de spectacle*, and unconscious of the rank of the illustrious expositor, most ungratefully repaid him for the information by shouts of *"à la porte!"*—"turn him out!" His royal highness, being fortunately hard of hearing, remained ignorant of the discourtesy, and continued his commentaries in stentorian tones.

J. R. PLANCHÉ,
Recollections and Reflections, c. 1826

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LITTLE MEN

Giving way to impulse, I said, in the politest tones I could command, "Excuse me, gentlemen, are you by any chance connected with the show now being performed in this theatre?" Beamingly they signified an affirmative; being, as I afterwards discovered, the Press Representative and the Assistant Stage Manager.

"Well," I said, "perhaps you will permit me to inform you that never in all my theatre-going experience have I encountered such an imbroglio of unadulterated rubbish or such an unimaginably tedious farrago of dreary, demoralising drivel. If its excuse is that it is intended merely as a vehicle for the leading performer, I can only say, gentlemen, that a self-respecting vehicle should have more than one wheel . . ." Pausing a moment to gauge the effect of this, I for the first time took a real look at the Little Men. And beheld in their eyes a vast unquenchable contentment, and read on their countenances the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual happiness.

GEORGE RICHARDS, *In a Letter to James Agate*

Villain shows his indiscretion;
Villain's partner makes confession;
Juvenile with golden tresses
Finds her pa, and dons long dresses;
Scapegrace comes home money-laden;
Hero comforts tearful maiden;
Soubrette marries loyal chappy;
Villain skips, and all are happy.

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, *Curtain*

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John of Ethirdova

BY HECTOR BOLITHO

THE valley of Ethirdova was vast and quiet. The mists had risen and formed a ceiling, stretching from hill to hill, so that the space below was like an immense fantastic room. Shreds of mist still clung to the heather. There were less than thirty little houses in the valley, but the people might have been dead, all was so still. The smoke from the chimneys rose slowly and the sheep in the fields were cold and did not move.

When night came it was so dark that the ceiling of mist could not be seen and the sheep slept in the wet heather. An old, slow woman came out of one of the cottages and walked down to the stream, carrying a torch which she held high above her head. She tied it to a post, near the last of the stepping stones by which the shepherds would make their way home.

She returned to the house in which she lived with her husband, their son Joseph and his wife Anna. In the living-room food was cooking over the fire and on the table were horn drinking cups, black bread and a bowl of milk. The old man sat beside the fire, sewing two goatskins together with a long bone needle. His wife joined him and they both looked with startled eyes towards the doorway into the next room. They could hear the midwife moving about beyond the curtain.

The shepherds came down from the fields. With them was Joseph, carrying a bunch of wild flowers that he had picked for Anna as he passed the woods. The way was dark and he stumbled over the clumps of heather as he walked towards the torch and the stepping-stones across the stream. He paused when he

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came to the agitated water and looked up at the ceiling of mist. He saw that it was breaking; that it had split in two, revealing the sky and the stars that were so well known to him. He had looked at them and counted them since he was a child. But there was a new star, low and brilliant, moving over him, it seemed, until it paused above his house. He stood still and scratched a sign in the earth with his crook, for there was a superstition in the valley that a young star appeared in the sky whenever a new child was born.

As Joseph hurried towards his house the rift in the mist widened so that the moon shone through with sudden streams of light, so strong that he could see the castle of Ethirdova with its four gigantic towers, between the far hills.

The Duke of Ethirdova did not fear God: instead, he thought of him as a kind friend who ripened the white grapes of the Rhine and the red grapes of Spain to provide him with wine. God had also created peacocks as ornaments for the Duke's terraces and to be roasted, with venison and salmon trout, so fat that they often burst in the oven. He spent most of his days in eating and drinking, with friends from neighbouring duchies, and his nights in deep peaceful sleep. When the sun shone and the fruit and crops were ripe, the people in the village would say, "The day is good. The Duke must be smacking his contented belly."

All prosperity and peace in Ethirdova seemed to depend on the Duke's feasts of wine and food. The ferryman, four miles upstream, told travellers as they crossed from one bank to the other that the Duke's revels saved him from poverty and death. His ropes would have rotted and his boat fallen to pieces long ago if it were not for the money he was paid for carrying the hogsheads from Spain, the flagons from the Rhine Valley and the casks from France, to the castle doors. The seamstress and the tailor were forever mending shirts and tunics and making new ones which the Duke so often burst with his fatness. He had long ago given up the chase as he was so heavy, and his hands so plump that they could not hold a bow. Therefore many of the villagers were kept busy killing stags and birds, netting fish and gathering mushrooms and fruit for his table.

Noblemen and their wives sometimes travelled more than one hundred miles to stay at Ethirdova castle. They were prepared for carousals that would last many days and nights. The wives were allowed to stay at the table for the feasts, but when the great haunches of meat and roasted birds had been eaten, they were led to another room while their husbands were left to drink, to

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tell bawdy stories, and boast of imagined conquests in the bed.

When the Duke was sixty years old he was so fat and heavy that he had to be carried to his bed. Leather loops were nailed to the sides of his big chair. Through these two wooden poles were passed, so that four servants could make their way with him, up the winding staircase and to his room. This notion was so successful that all the other chairs were fitted with loops lest the guests should need similar help when the feasts ended. The long poles stood in a corner to be used if they were needed.

The servants in the castle were soon depraved through the example of their master and, huddled behind the immense gold and scarlet leather screen at the end of the room, they would sip the wine and cognac until they also became silly with drink.

On such a night, when the guests became so fogged with wine that they were trying to balance empty goblets on their noses and breaking them, and laying wagers as to how many creases there were in the Duke's belly, one of the guests became so sleepy in his chair that he frothed at the mouth and slid to the floor beneath the table.

No-one saw him fall: his neighbours were too busy with their own bemused state and the servants behind the screen were too lost in wine, nudging the maids in the ribs, meddling with their skirts and telling the bawdy tales they had heard at the table.

The drunken guest had fallen so that, while he was lying on the floor, he was strangled by his own collar. He was found next morning, dead and cold, his eyes jutting out of their sockets and his mouth so twisted and ugly that a servant placed a cloth over his face to hide it.

Because of this mishap John, the son of Joseph and Anna, came to work for the Duke of Ethirdova.

Ten years had passed since Joseph saw the star pause over his little house, on the night that Anna bore him their only child. They cared for him tenderly and when Anna went to work in the fields she took John with her and taught him the names of the birds, the flowers and the trees. He knew the geese that flew over the water and the malicious ravens that came down from the hills. He gathered the mushrooms that grew beneath the trees, but he was not clever enough to herd the sheep without losing them in the hollows. His father would find him sleeping beside a stone wall or walking down a slope with but a few of the sheep, wearing daisy chains he had made for them and hung about their necks. John was good and obedient, but his father and mother were unhappy because of his lack of wits. Yet he

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was beautiful, with cream skin, gold hair and gentle dark eyes with which he seemed to peer into distances no-one else could comprehend.

When John was ten years old the Duke's bailiff noticed that he was pleasing and docile; so he engaged him to work on a strange task within the castle.

This was about the time that the Duke's guest had fallen and been strangled by his collar. John was ordered to sit under the dinner table, on a stool, before the meal began. There he had to stay wide-awake and watch, lest another of the guests ever fell to the floor, from the burden of his wine and the lightness of his reason. John was ordered, should such a dangerous moment recur, to loosen the guest's collar and save him from choking.

Every night John sat beneath the table. He would watch the legs, feet and loins of the Duke and his guests, knowing them and recognising them in this way, for he never saw their shoulders or their faces. In the summer, when they sweated from the heat and the wine, they would kick off their boots and sit with their bare feet on the floor.

When John was eleven years old his grandfather died. He had been terrible and noisy during his last days, calling down curses on himself and talking of the fire, pain and long tortures of hell. His old wife, with Joseph and Anna, wept in the room beyond the goatskin curtains and were afraid to go near him. He lay on his bed, beating his body, his eyes like the eyes of a mad hound, calling, "Old woman, you are for the fire! Son Joseph, you are for the fire! And you, Anna, are for the fire!"

When John walked towards the curtain Joseph and Anna tried to hold him back.

"You must not go," they said. "He will smash you with his great hands."

But the witless boy was not afraid; when he went to the side of the bed his grandfather became calm and still. He whispered to John, "There is a mark on your head, my son; a sign of the light."

He leaned up and looked close at the boy's face. He saw, set in John's golden hair and on his forehead, two bars of burning silver, one crossed upon the other, and he said again, "There is a mark, my son; a sign of the light." Then he fell back on the pillow and was dead.

John did not understand what his grandfather had said, for his mind was slow. But he went into the valley and picked little white flowers. He brought them to the bedroom and placed them on the old man's tangled hair. He was alone in the house. His

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father and mother, with his grandmother watching them, were on the edge of the forest, digging a hole and lining it with leaves. There they would bury the dead old man.

When John had placed the white flowers on his grandfather's hair, he climbed on to the bed and sat beside him. He touched the old cheeks with his young fingers; then he kissed the hard, lean hands, which were crossed on the body. He lifted the small round stones that had been placed on his grandfather's eyes and kissed the wrinkled lids, for he had loved the old man with all his heart.

It was already dark when John walked up to the castle and sat on his stool beneath the table. This was the night of the great feast to celebrate the Duke's sixtieth birthday and while John sat, watching the shifting feet and the fat buttocks of the guests in their chairs, his father and mother carried the corpse of his grandfather to the grave. They covered the body with earth and moss; then they stood still and looked at the sky. A star fell from the far pattern of the heavens and down among the clouds, where it perished. Joseph made a sign on the grave with his spade, for it was believed in Ethirdova that when an old man died a star fell back to earth and joined his soul.

The feast for the Duke's birthday was more splendid than any before. After an hour of eating and drinking, the ladies left the room and went upstairs, where they wove shawls and talked of the miseries of virtue. Their husbands were always so drunk at the end of their revels that they were already asleep when their servants brought them up. Virtue was, therefore, not a pride but a sorrow to their wives.

While they talked with sad voices, and wove their hungry desires into patterns of wool and silk, the Duke and his guests drank the night away. They kicked off their boots so vigorously that John, on his stool beneath the table, had to be wary lest he be struck by one of the big, hot feet.

Above him was the scene he never saw: a feast of roasted peacocks and partridges, and multi-coloured marzipan in crystal dishes. The goblets for the wine were made of polished coconut-shell and filigree silver and they were decorated with cabochon stones and polished agate. There were gilt dishes filled with fresh fruit from the orchard and crystallised pears and figs and brown peaches, preserved in brandy, brought from France.

When the feast was ended, the Duke and his guests spread their drunken hands, hit the table, and called for more wine. At midnight the servants withdrew to eat the rich remnants of the

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feast, and the Duke tried to tell a lecherous story, but his tongue was muddled and no-one heeded him. He lowered his head on to his folded arms and went to sleep.

John was tired after the long day and he yawned as he watched the feet around him. He thought of his grandfather sewing goatskins together with the long bone needle; then of the old man lying on his bed with the round stones on his dead eyes. John yawned again and slowly went to sleep.

None of the guests was sober enough to notice the Duke withdrawing his hands and his head disappearing as his body fell to the floor. John was still asleep and did not realise that he was no longer alone under the table. When the servants came back to the room they found the Duke, dozing and breathing heavily. They lifted him from the floor to his chair; then they put the poles through the leather loops and carried him upstairs. His guests followed him, snorting and swaying, and hitting the wall of the staircase as they climbed.

The Duke's physician was brought to attend him, and while the sleepy Duchess clung to the bell-rope, muttering her fears, her husband was bled and sent into a weak and anxious sleep.

Two of the servants went back to the dining-hall, snuffed the candles and left John beneath the table. The room was still dark when he woke and slowly became aware of his folly. He was cold and afraid as he stepped through the long stone corridors, out of the little door at the back of the castle, and down the hill. The stream made the only sound in the valley, for the birds were still asleep and there was no wind to shake the branches of the trees. John hurried to the cottage, where there was black bread, cheese, and milk waiting for him. He got into his bed on the wall. He could hear his father and mother breathing quietly, but there was no peace for him. Slowly he became afraid lest the Duke should banish him from his task and make him work in the forest. The fear kept him awake, and next evening it came true.

Another boy was chosen to sit under the table and John was sent to the edge of the forest where he gathered mushrooms and berries. When he brought them back to the kitchens the other servants teased him and called him "Half-wit".

As he grew older, and gained in height and strength, his brain was still small and his father was ashamed when he saw his son treated as a fool by the people in the village. When children were disobedient their fathers would say, "I'll take you to John the Half-wit's house and leave you there." Then the children would be afraid as they remembered John's strange mumbling and his vacant eyes that did not look at them when he passed by.

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One day when John was sitting in the hut on the edge of the forest he heard people shouting. He looked out and saw the Duke in the big chair in which he was always carried. He was waving his hands; his eyes were closed and his face was purple. The servants lurched and moaned and after a struggle they bore the chair into the hut. Then one of them ran to the Castle to bring the physician.

After a few minutes had passed the Duke opened his eyes, looked about the hut and saw John almost hiding in a corner. He clenched his hands and hit the arms of the chair as he shouted, "I know you! Come here! I know you because you went to sleep and I might have died."

He leaned forward and when he stared at John's face he saw two bars of shining silver, crossed one upon the other, in his hair. A great terror shook him and he wailed with fear, "The sign! I'm for the fire! I am going to die! I'm for the fire!"

The Duke beat the arms of the chair with his hands and the servants were so afraid that they moved towards the door, but when John moved nearer to him the vast old man grew calm.

He stretched his peaceful fingers towards John's forehead and said, "You have the sign . . ." Then, with a whimper in his voice, he pleaded, "I am to die and I am for the fire. Promise me, my boy, that you will climb to the summit of the mountain every anniversary of this day, and bring to my grave a great ball of snow lest I perish in the flames. Do you listen?"

John moved nearer, for he was not afraid. He whispered, "Yes," and the Duke said again, "You promise that you will bring snow down to me, for fire comes at the end, but snow is the enemy of fire."

John was so close to him when he said "Yes" again that the old man was able to touch the cross on his forehead, before he fell back into the chair and died.

The Dukes of Ethirdova were buried in a cave which was cut into the side of the mountain after which they were named. A long tunnel led to the vast chamber, with walls of polished malachite and granite, decorated with crystals and illuminated by an opening in the roof. This led to the sunlight and the sloping field above. Outside, where the hole opened into the pasture, a rough stone wall protected the edge so that the sheep and lambs could not fall, nor shepherds passing that way in the dark. The tunnel approaching the burial chamber was decorated with mosaics dedicated to the blossoming pleasures of life rather than the punishments and terrors of the world to come.

The splendour of the Duke's funeral procession was spoiled

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because the coffin was so big and heavy. The men who carried him were chosen for their strength, but they still groaned and spluttered under the weight, and when they were half-way up the slope they had to send for a farm cart to take the coffin the rest of the way to the tunnel.

The group of mourners stared at the coffin and did not see John running up the mountain, clambering over stones and rough places. Around him moved the ruthless winds. He climbed from the slopes of earth to the snow, above the clouds, whispering to himself all the time, "A snowball to kill the fire! A snowball to kill the fire!"

The Duke, the greatest man in all the land, had asked him to place a snowball on his tomb: he must run on to a place where the snow was deep. The Duke had chosen him of all the people in Ethirdova for this task. He knelt down and, moving his vigorous hands deep into the snow, he made a ball as big as his head. He pounded it and beat it until it was hard as rock.

Then he sped down the mountain towards the burial cave. But as he ran the snowball melted slowly in his hands. When he saw this he wept, and his tears fell on the snowball so that when he came to the lower hill, it was no bigger than a turkey's egg. He ran through the tunnel, but when he came to the coffin his hands were wet and the snowball had vanished. John slid his hands down the side of the coffin and entreated the Duke to forgive him. He cried so loud that the two watchmen who had followed him chased him down the hill, pelting him with stones.

John did not go home: he turned towards the forest and the hut in which the Duke had died. He was humble with the pain of failure that he did not comprehend. He knelt on the earth and begged to be forgiven, and he promised that next year and every year, on the anniversary of the Duke's death, he would climb the mountain and bring the promised snowball to the tomb.

Many changes came to Ethirdova after the Duke died. He left no son to inherit his castle and his land. After the Duchess died they passed to a cousin, who lived in even greater pomp and splendour one hundred miles away: he came to Ethirdova only once a year, so the peasants in the valley were able to live as they pleased. Freedom helped them to prosper; they built new houses and used ploughs and horses in the fields.

On each anniversary of the Duke's death there was a celebration, not because of his virtues or his grandeur, but because on that day John the Half-wit always kept his promise. He climbed the mountain and brought back an immense snowball to place

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on the Duke's tomb, although it always melted away in his hands.

He became a grown man, beautiful and strong. But his mother and father were ashamed of him and their only defence was conscious silence as they watched his increasing strangeness. He wandered over the hills each day: he still made daisy chains and hung them around the necks of the lambs in the fields.

While John was still young the people in the valley laughed at his idiocy, each year, when he climbed the mountain. Slowly, they became amazed because he was a man whose faith was greater than his wisdom. He became a mystery to the people in the valley. They told their little children about him when he walked by, and on the day of the year when he climbed the mountain, farmers and shepherds with their wives came from distant villages to spend the day in Ethirdova and to see John run down the mountain with the melting snowball.

He was almost sixty years old when he made his last journey. He set out at dawn when the first pink light touched the edge of the cold white snow. He climbed for two hours, until he passed through the low clouds that hid the valley and the houses below.

The cloud through which John had to pass was so thick that he could see only his hands swinging beside him. When he climbed beyond it his hair was sprinkled with drops of water; his face was red and his lips purple from the cold. He looked back at the cloud, spinning in currents of air and rolling down the mountain, tearing its edges on the rocks. Then he came to a place that was strange to him. The mist was thick again so that he had to walk timidly, higher and higher. He paused in a rift where something soft touched his leg. He bent down and his fingers closed on some leaves. Then he knelt and found small white lilies growing in the snow.

The mist cleared and while the great thunder and rain tormented the valley, the top of the mountain was calm, and coloured by the last rays of the sun. John found, instead of the whiteness of the snow, the whiteness of thousands of rock lilies. He was so tired that he stretched himself among them and went to sleep.

John dreamed while he slept and many pictures passed through his mind. First he saw all the cottages in Ethirdova, but they were shining white instead of brown. Then he saw himself as a boy, walking among them while the people laughed at him and called him "John the Half-wit". Then his body became conscious of the bed of lilies and he dreamed that he was naked and warm and beautifully alone.

Lying thus, he looked up the slope and saw a figure standing

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against the great moving sky. A hand moved, and John saw within the palm seven shining stars. He was afraid and, as he lowered his head, a hand touched him.

A voice said, "You are John. I know who you are, but tell me what you are."

John trembled and could not speak, but the hand touching him made him calm and he answered, "I am John the Half-wit. I am nothing. I could only gather fruit for my master. I cannot count sheep in the hills."

The hand was moved from his head so that he was able to look up. When he saw the stars in the palm of the hand again he dared not raise his eyes beyond them.

The voice spoke to him again. "Every year you have come to the mountain to keep your promise. You have faith, which is greater than wisdom. Because of your faith a flame will burn, here upon the mountain, so that the people of Ethirdova will remember your name forever."

John lifted his eyes and saw God moving away from him. And he saw that He was followed by a sad man with faggots on his back. His feet were pierced so that the lilies on which he trod were stained crimson. John rose to his feet and followed them.

The storm died in the valley so that the people came out of their houses and watched the clouds passing quickly by, leaving the moon to shine on the summit of Ethirdova. They climbed the hill, towards the cave where the Duke was buried, hoping to see John when he returned from his pilgrimage. The strangers from other parts of the country, who had been sheltering in the outhouses of the castle, also came out when the storm had passed. Eight hundred of them waited to see John return.

When many hours had passed, some of them went into the cave to see if John was already there. But he had not come back. Then they waited through the night and watched the heights of the mountain until the last cloud drifted by. Then they saw that, as it touched the summit, it was edged with flame. They saw a light there that was neither moon nor sun nor fire.

The older people who remembered John from when he was a boy, and whose parents had seen the cross of silver on his head as they died, knew that he would never come back. They sank to their knees in the wet grass, and the younger ones followed them, until all the eight hundred were bowed before the miracle of the flame that was not fire. It was like a gigantic white sword that would be on the summit of Ethirdova for ever.

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SURPRISE PACKAGE!

FOR CHRISTMAS TIME . . . A SPECIAL ARGOSY SUPPLEMENT OF PUZZLES AND POETRY, FEATURES AND FUN

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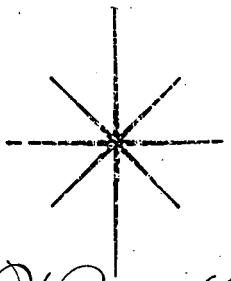

The Winter Child

A NEW POEM BY JOHN PUDNEY

The last of the flowers gone
As you arrive
In time to hear the Christmas baby talk,
And bells which still assert a faith alive,
Mingling with twentieth century doubt
That mankind can survive.

So welcome, winter child, as yet without
Awareness of the daffodils. An innocence
To fill the heart with loving apprehension,
As one who tiptoes to the brink of an immense
Pellucid waterscape where but one ripple
Of ambition stirs,
Your will to live and grow in man's dimension.

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remember '66?

1. Which team was fourth in the World Cup tournament?
2. Which famous opera house was re-opened in September? What was the inaugural production?
3. How long did the British seamen's strike last?
4. What notable event in British journalism occurred on May 3?
5. Geometric hairstyles for women caused a sensation in New York. Whose designs were they?
6. Can you name four great centenaries celebrated in Britain this year?
7. Which long-running musical finished this year in London?
8. Which road bridge did the Queen Mother open in Scotland in August?
9. A celebrated English novelist died on Easter Sunday. Who?
10. To which member of the Royal Family was a daughter born on July 31?
11. More than one captain led England in last season's test matches. Do you know who they were?
12. Whom did Miss Luci Baines Johnson marry?
13. Which British minister resigned over a question of Defence?
14. What was the name of the vessel in which Francis Chichester set sail single-handed for Sydney?
15. What was the Labour Party's majority in the last General Election?

Answers on page 160

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Are you a whiz at words? Try this Argosy quiz and find out ...

Working with Words

Can you guess who would use the following technical terms?

WHO WOULD MAKE:

1. A forked tenon?
2. A closed feather?
3. A double twinkle?
4. A suture?

WHO MIGHT BE:

5. Barding?
6. Carding?
7. Ledgering?
8. Layering?

WHAT IS:

9. A spanker?
10. Pointillism?
11. An ocarina?
12. A cogging-mill?

DO YOU KNOW:

13. Who works on a fly-floor?
14. Who would use pitons?
15. Who needs to know his VFR and IFR?
16. Where is a pie unwelcome?

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Spot the Name?

Here are the names of famous writers, playwrights, painters and composers made up as anagrams. How long will it take you to unravel them?

WRITERS

A Nude

Breton

Draw in

Sprout

Clearly

Snicked

Thy cares

PLAYWRIGHTS

Rope in
Hears din

PAINTERS

Blast once
One verse
Sea mist

COMPOSERS

Mans Tea
Her swing
Cats trail
Drive

The Mysterious Syllable

Find the missing letters which form one word with the first part given and another with the second. (e.g. Pot — rance: potent/entrance)

1. Oct—rage
2. Pub—hen
3. Sam—at
4. Com—tery
5. Er—om
6. Sto—ine
7. But—ish
8. Mar—rest
9. Cris—land
10. Ran—bre
11. Sol—ea
12. Qui—tail
13. Lan—ing
14. Aw—amed
15. Ton—sing
16. Ea—stem
17. In—ral
18. Rai—ion
19. Dis—let
20. For—mane

Answers on page 160

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A POET'S

Christmas is here:
Winds whistle shrill,
Icy and chill.
Little care we;
Little we fear
Weather without,
Sheltered about
The Mahogany Tree.

W. M. THACKERAY, *The Mahogany Tree*

England was merry England, when
Old Christmas brought his sports again.
'Twas Christmas broach'd the mightiest ale;
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale;
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year.

SIR WALTER SCOTT, *Marmion*

At Christmas play and make good cheer,

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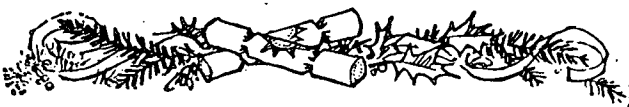

CHRISTMAS

'Twas the night before Christmas,
when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring,
not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung
by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas
soon would be there.

CLEMENT C. MOORE, *The Night before Christmas*

High noon behind the tamarisks—the
sun is hot above us—
As at Home the Christmas Day is breaking
wan.
They will drink our healths at dinner—those
who tell us how they love us,
And forget us till another year be gone!

RUDYARD KIPLING, *Christmas in India*

For Christmas comes but once a year.

THOMAS TUSSER, *The Farmer's Daily Diet*

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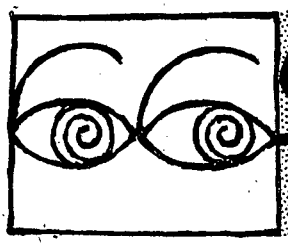
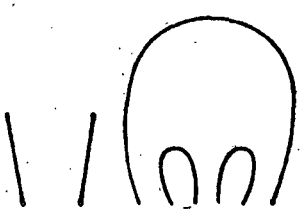
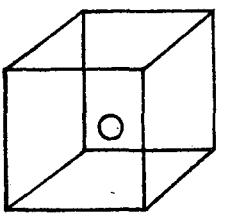


eye teasers

Seeing is believing, so goes the adage. But can you trust your eyes? Our teasers show that seeing is deceiving!

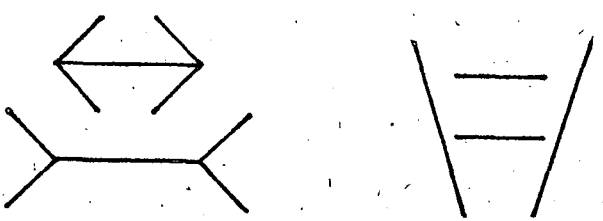


1. What is this?



2. On which side of the box does the dot appear?

3. How many objects do you see?



4. In these figures which lines are the longer? Top or bottom?

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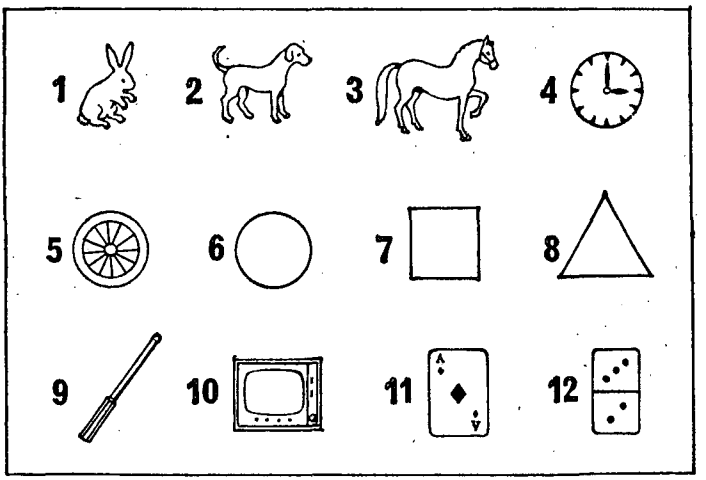
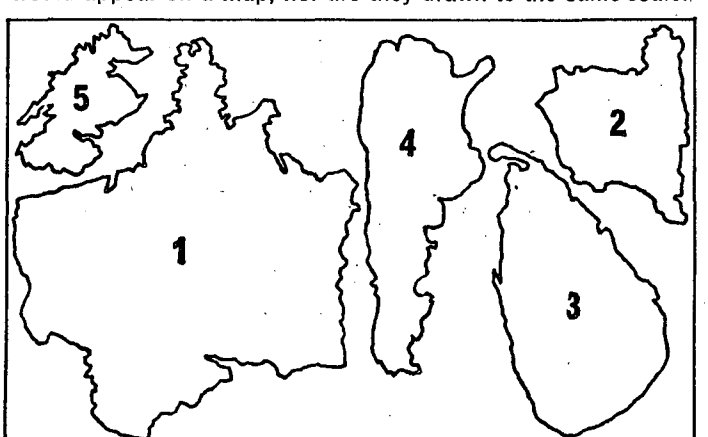
A REMEMBERING RIDDLE

Look at the objects below, close the magazine and then write the names from memory. Remembering 8 out of 12 is a good score.



WHAT'S THE SHAPE OF THE COUNTRY?

Identify the five countries below. They are not placed as they would appear on a map, nor are they drawn to the same scale.



ANSWERS HERE: 2. Spain. 3. Ceylon. 4. Argentina. 5. Scotland.

Teasers puzzle—1. A charwoman with her bucket. 2. Depending on how you look at it, the dot appears on the front and the back side. 3. Three objects: two faces at the side, and an urn in the middle. 4. The lines are the same length. Countries puzzle—1. France.

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Holiday time is games time . . . here's an old favourite with a comic appraisal

SCRABBLE

Wistful Thoughts of a Defeated Husband

by W. W. WATT

When we, my darling, deign to dabble
In that distraction known as Scrabble,
Like other sweet, loquacious women,
Your choice of words is indiscrimin:
You pour them out—ten, twenty, thirty—
The horizontal and the verti,
But all is verbal fiddle-faddle
From the dull lexicon of adol.

I seek not quantity but quali,
Not monosyllables but poly.
I calmly lie in wait to stab you
With brilliant coups from my vocabu.
My words would baffle Dr. Johnson—
If I could find the missing conson.
The trouble is that you, you nincom,
Complete your words, while mine are incom.

How mercilessly I would lick you
If all my thoughts became articu!

W. W. Watt

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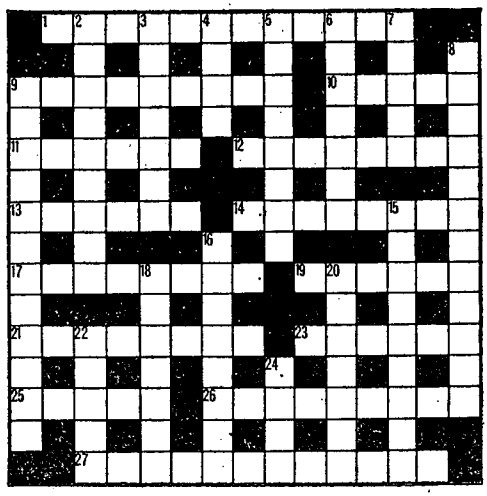
ARGOSY CHRISTMAS CROSSWORD

Solution on page 160



ACROSS

1 Settles what the least important artiste does? (5, 3, 4).

9 How to travel abroad? Vote Conservative again! (4, 5).

10 A finger to classify (5).

11 Show evidence of superior thinking (6).

12 Can I head this way for the ranch? (8).

13 Navy in part of ship—part that is most important (6).

14 They need two blades in a row (8).

17 Dirty tree in matchless setting? (8).

19 Great singer muddles our accounts. (6).

21 Fabulous creature in silk is after a degree! (8).

23 Like stars? (6).

25 O.K. as a change in Japan (5).

26 One skilled in dissecting a nuclear physicist? (9).

27 In a sense the tendency is agonising (5-7).

DOWN

2 Defeat welcome to batting side? (9).

3 Naturally, it does the timber no good! (7).

4 Clothes informally (4).

5 "Beware Of——to a quarrel" (*Hamlet*) (8).

6 Latin II is first, this way! (7).

7 Charged Leonard about a penny (5).

8 No contractor advocating growth? (12).

9 Match-winning hit? (5-3, 4).

15 A lot you'll know if you have it! (9).

16 Songbird of Communist origin? (8).

18 Eastern ruler's favourite fruit (7).

20 It shows the pressure under which we live! (7).

22 Could be what's left by the reaper, maybe (5).

24 Articles made in Herts (4)

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sing a song of CHRISTMAS

Here are some extracts from Christmas carols, songs and poems. Can you give the first lines? Answers on page 160

1. The silent stars go by
2. The holly branch shone
3. The oxen standing by
4. I spied three ships
5. Laid within a manger on this blessed morn
6. Ye who now do bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing
7. The rising of the sun, the running of the deer
8. They looked up and saw a star
9. Snow had fallen, snow on snow
10. Wild and sweet, the words repeat
11. Five gold rings
12. Field and fountain, moor and mountain
13. But we are neighbours' children
14. If you haven't got a penny, a halfpenny will do
15. Brighter visions beam afar
16. To touch their harps of gold

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A new short story from one of Britain's most distinguished writers . . .

Mama Mia

BY WILLIAM SANSOM

THE possum peace of the suburbs has played itself out. We are no longer deceived.

A red row of villas, each with quiet gate and garden? Modestly withdrawn from the laburnum's yellow glare, the cherry's shameless flounce? . . . But behind those nicely draped curtains a greying alcoholic sips her husband's aftershave; and within a bright façade three streets away a father of four rocks astride the new *au pair*, and on the gleaming brown linoleum somewhere else a nearly headless body bleeds for the bluebottles.

People don't like to be *seen* doing those things. Talk must not be created. Though in the end the papers speak out—look at the addresses of the last three random rapists and check—and with continuous regularity over the years of curtained vice and violence, madness and murder, these news items accustom us to look upon such rows of blinkered windows with dark suspicion if not downright well-Hoovered horror.

None of which mattered or even occurred to Piero Tomaselli, twenty years old and lately arrived in N.W. 8 from a poor part of smiling Italy. He saw from his bedroom window only a duller vista, day by dog-day, than he could ever have imagined. His practical respect for well-to-do bricks and mortar praised the air of moderate affluence. But he hated the peace. Where was life without people? He had come a long way, but now he said to himself, "Not for long."

Piero was employed as man-of-all-work at a small public house set back from the corner of two tree-shaded streets. He lived in. His small room overlooked part of a front pavement, on which a few brightly-painted tables had been placed for open-air refreshment in the new English Continental manner. Piero,

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sometimes watching the waiterless groups sipping warm beer and not talking much, thought this to be a scene of ancient insular tradition. How inscrutable, how like the Chinese the English were, he thought; only long-faced and pink.

He sighed. He had scraped and saved and even stolen a little to get to England and the pound sterling. Well, all he had now to do was save up a few of those resilient green notes and be on his way to another job nearer some centre of things, where people bustled and talked and girls walked to and fro. Parts of London were excellent from this point of view, full of an easy brazen vitality, with the inscrutable girls free from certain tedious southern inhibitions. It would only mean waiting here in this suburb another week or two. Years of an empty pocket had accustomed him to waiting. Though it was more difficult here with nothing to watch.

He sighed. And what had this particular morning to offer? A white and blue June sky: he liked that. Like most southerners he prized a fair sky but hated a hot sun. And what was going on outside the window? As far as the eye could see, innumerable weatherless red roofs were going on. And on and on. Indeed, an occasional person passed along the pavement, but always walking slowly, as if delayed by the green pace of gardens and trees.

Then at the end of one street he saw the high oblong yellow-and-silver front of a large motor-coach idling towards him. Empty, he thought; looking for somewhere to park, he told himself: and turned back into the room to do what he had come up for, change his shirt, trim his hair and smoke half of one of those unbelievably expensive English cigarettes: he had half an hour off.

Then occurred a suburban event which the newspapers do not talk about, though it is rarer than all their vice and crime. In fact, an explosion of people. Right out in the open! For unknown to Piero the motor-coach had drawn up outside his place of work; had slid open its doors; had emitted some forty colourfully-dressed women of middle and older age.

What then struck the quiet air was less a sound of voices as sound in its very essence, pure volume, as when in a quiet room the sound of a turned-on television set mounts suddenly into being: as though sound itself is poured into the silence, for a brief second unrecognisable until somehow it has spread out over all the corners of silence lurking about the room's four walls.

Piero's first thought was that some sort of cyclone had swept

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up from nowhere. Nothing else could so abruptly have invaded the natural quiet. But in the next second he had analysed the sound into voices, and reason told him it must be the momentarily mistaken switch-on of a high-volume radio. He was reminded of days when he had washed up in the kitchen of a large restaurant, when the swinging of the waiters' door had thrown in sudden bursts of a hundred people talking and eating. But then, an extra second later, alert hormones had sent him the message that these voices were all women's voices, and some echo of the open air and an intense shrilling of laughter asserted that these really were real women really there, most alive and in no need of amplification.

He sprang more than ran to the window, and with no hesitation leaned right out over the centre of the sill, a smile already on his hopeful lips. It was an operatic appearance which nobody saw. Far down below a top-view of coloured scarves and crimped hairsets and hairnets and blue, black, purple, pink rinses and even the formalism of tight-rolled curlers streamed like a chute of big fat coloured pebbles towards the door of the saloon bar.

It was a sight so immediately extraordinary that Piero only breathed two words, as if in multiple recognition, "*Mama mia*," before he digested the true age of this abrupt gift of women and let the smile die on his lips. He went back to sit on his bed and picked up mirror and scissors to continue what he had begun, the excision of several hairs which untidied his nostrils.

He was no young Italian god, no bronze beauty: his face was square, his nose snub, and he might have been, say, a dark-eyed young Scot had it not been for a vitality and mobility which seemed somehow to keep his features in motion even when they were still. Remarkable essences of life, like invisible steam, pour from such a skin, such a nest of agile nerves. Viscous liquids, while not moving, glow with the same inner liveliness. Much of all this came from an absolute lack of self-consciousness and fear: it was an outward-bound face. Poor, his childhood had been rich in love and the confidence this leaves for ever after.

So Piero saw the silver scissors penetrate his nostrils while up the stairs came a muttering of muffled but enormous noise. Occasionally he looked at the door, its grain-painted brown varnish dull and closed and definite. Should he, after all, perhaps go down? There might be a daughter or two? But going down would mean work? He went to the door and opened it—sound machine-gunned in like a thousand tape-recorders talking

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at once. He shut the door. Had he not an interest in how the natives behaved? Had he no curiosity to see so unusual a foreign phenomenon? No. Piero was of practical Italian stock.

Downstairs in the saloon bar the Nubroom Office Cleaning Company's annual beanfeast for permanent staff was gearing up at a speed which clearly bewildered the two barmen; but they were barmen of a rustic north-of-the-park suburb, and not used to the vivacities of Balham, where Nubroom enrolled most of its ladies. With forty ample office cleaners in a bar suitable for about thirty ordinary persons, there was little space to move—yet move these ladies did. Their bosoms rose and fell with talk and wild laughter, their arms flung out for more and more light ale and mild ale and stout and port and gin-and-pep, and three of them had already linked arms and started a kind of bobbing up-and-down dance. Yet this was only a twenty-minute stop, and at the beginning of their day!

A few early racing gentlemen, regulars, had slunk quickly out at the first sight of them—and well they might have, for these were no longer the innocent-looking coloured pebbles seen by Piero from above; these were faces, a carnival of forty voracious female faces furious with the muscle of middle age and the multiple intoxications of massed liberty. The day had begun early with stout out of string bags. The ladies were filled with the set determination to have a good time at every cost, and above all with the rising interplay of carefree leathery lungs each intent on outdoing the other. These were strong women, past the inhibiting years of prettiness, wild with the will to make it a day to remember.

Faces with no teeth, faces with National teeth white as sinks, faces with moles and lumps and wispy strands of beard, red and pink and yellow and white faces, faces armoured with plastic-rimmed glasses and flanked by coloured ear-rings, faces crowned with heads of crimped hair so holy they would stay the day in coloured nets or in curlers neat as little rolls of linoleum, and above all faces set on solid necks, broad bosoms, battleship rumps. Faces screaming and yelling and hooting so that even their own extraordinary shapes and contortions were drowned by the sounds they made.

They emptied their glasses at pressed speed, filled them up, emptied them, and while one corner began to chant the traditional appeal to *Daisy*, another muscled off a small space and began the riot of *Knees up Mother Brown*, flinging up their skirts and knees like a team of shire-horses in rut. Yet, five

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minutes before, the bar had been so quiet you could nearly have heard the electric clock click. Unbelievable. And half an hour later, when they were all as suddenly to be gone, driven off to some unsuspecting woodland park farther north, still unbelievable. Unreportable—one cannot blame the papers. Only a mass of ash and stubs and a few broken beads remained as evidence of what was for the time as violent a visitation as a small cavalry charge. The residue had a dead party-over look of sad, seamy insignificance.

But a matter of much significance occurred long before they left. Personal, private, unobserved. It began with a Mrs. Betty Brown of Balham and the six pints of stout frothed down inside her since ten-thirty that morning. What goes in must come out. Mrs. Brown and a friend broke off slap in the middle of *When Father Papered the Parlour* to ask the young Irish barman where the Ladies was. Or, as Mrs. Brown put it through shining teeth which floated about within her generous mouth as if speaking for themselves, "The drip-dry department."

"Thrip-thry?" asked the bewildered man from Ireland.

"Where your Mum spends her mornings," screamed Mrs. Brown from under netted locks of rolled brass, "the ruddy powder room."

"Oh—" said the young man slowly, "You're after wanting the toilet?"

He pointed to a door across the bar. "And up the stairs," he said. "And do us a favour, should you be seeing a young Eyetie up there, please to tell him to come down and lend a hand, the idle Wop."

Up the stairs Betty Brown and her friend went and on the landing it was like being in a quiet ordinary house, with a line of carpet and linoleum, lace curtains to a far window, a few brown doors leading to bedrooms. One door had LADIES on it, and Mrs. Brown got in first.

When she came out she looked up and down the landing and felt a curiosity about all those rooms, as anyone feels in a strange house. It was so quiet. Other people's things! She then remembered about the "Eyetie"—Nice excuse, she thought, and swung open the door of the first room. It was a cupboard, mops fell all about her. "Sod that for a busman's holiday," she swore and, giggling with joy, stowed them back.

The next door was Piero's.

She opened it more cautiously, and poked her head round. She saw a narrow dark little room with a single bed and the back of a young man naked to the waist half-inside his wardrobe.

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At the sound of the door Piero had twisted quickly round. But twisted so quickly a coathanger caught itself in the gold chain round his neck and stayed hanging there as both his hands opened to express the word "Who?"

They opened still wider as he saw this "who" was a big blonde woman standing doubled-over with laughter in the doorway's shadow.

He liked laughter; it went down instantly in the woman's favour, although she was plainly on the solid side in weight and age. And yet . . . good legs on high silver shoes, a bright green dress that reminded him of unaffordable night-streets, and a face painted and not much lined, more hardened with wear: the face of a woman, if she had worked in the fields at home, of not more than thirty.

And Mrs. Brown, just fifty, gasped for laughing and pointed at him: "You—you're wearing a coathanger on you."

He looked down.

"I beg your pardon." And tried to free it.

But it was stuck; the point of the hook had gone through an eye in the link holding his medallion.

"You the Eyetie?" she said, coming into the room. "Allow me."

She tugged at the hanger so hard it brought his whole torso forward. To save himself from falling he flung his arms round her. This brought from Mrs. Brown the opening strains of *The Blue Danube* and she straightaway spun the young Italian into the first huge hops of a waltz which ended with a wallop against the narrow near wall.

They bounced off this wall, Mrs. Brown staggered on her heels and, still embraced, they fell across the room—about two yards—on to the bed. Betty Brown's beer-happy mind woke up only to sensations of bedding and man.

"Strika," she gasped. "You're a fast worker, Valentino."

"Pardon?" said Piero.

He sat bolt upright in her arms, surprised and statuesque. Betty Brown abruptly pressed him close in her great biceps, coathanger and all, and covered his mouth in a long wet mooing kiss, as if he were a sweet or the neck of a stout bottle.

Perhaps of motherly intention, perhaps part of the crazy day's liberty . . . but not unmixed with sex and the upstairness of the bedroom, not clear at all.

Perhaps an exemplary moment, in practice, of the theory about certain short and boyish-faced male actors and singers, that they bring out the deep mother in a million women whose

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conscious urge is nevertheless to put them to bed for decidedly less maternal purposes.

With the powerful smells of scent and woman and beer rushing from nose to brain, with the warmth of her arms and that wet close sudden kiss, Piero's potent young body stiffened with confused conceptions of conquest and need: three inches away from her face he could no longer see the whole woman, no longer question how old she might be—he had tasted lipstick, and he only saw a halo of golden hair and a pair of longing eyes lost in hunger. Women are women. Beds are beds. Unromantic, a practical man, he began the romantic words he knew to be his best insurance: "Oh my heart, oh my God, I love you."

And he gave a long sigh: "*Mama mia.*"

"Go on with you," she breathed hot in his face.

The beer on her breath smelled to him not stale but opulent: he pressed his mouth into it and ran his hands fast over her body, warm, fat, round. But instead of falling back on the pillow, their two heads, his man's, her woman's, cleared like sharp clicking machines: they sat bolt upright.

"The door," he whispered, quickly shutting and locking it.

"Quick," she said, and bent forward to undo something.

"Take it off," he whispered. "Your dress."

"The bus," she said, and pulled him down.

Minutes later, she wrenched her mouth away from his. "Be a dear," she whispered. "That coathanger—sling it round the back, can you, dear?"

He tried to, but it got caught under his armpit, so he let it slide back, and instead raised himself on his arms and let this strange wooden triangle swing between them like some sort of metronome, marking time, measuring the minutes to the end.

"Betty! Betty!"

"Betty Brown!"

She was sitting on the bed doing herself up and now put a finger to her lips, whispering, "That's me."

He thumbed at the window: "They're outside. It's okay."

Then looked down at her. "You go? You must?"

She nodded and stood up. "It's our day out, you see."

He didn't see. But now they both saw each other very clearly, and both in their various ways felt an aftermath of sadness. It crossed her mind, "Baby-snatcher." And it crossed his mind, "Her? What have I come to?" But not cruelly, for much had been shared, and together they were sharing even this sadness, the over-and-done-ness and what now?

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His heart went out to her. "You could say ill—you are ill," he said.

She looked at him hopelessly, "I've never felt better in my life," she said, and suddenly burst into tears.

They were over in a second. She was tough. She made it into a kind of laugh, pointing at his chest: "That coathanger," she said, stroking her bosom, "that ruddy coathanger. I've heard of medals, but never a ruddy coathanger," and walked to the door. "You're sweet," she suddenly said, and came back and kissed him quickly, like a boy, on the cheek.

Outside someone was opening the lavatory door; she heard the cistern still flushing and stepped quickly outside. "Edie Bates!" he heard her cry, "You been drownin' your mother-in-law in there?"

Mrs. Brown was known by her friends and neighbours to have no regular man. "All that" was a thing of the past with her. She had often said as much, and a quiet settledness in her way of life emphasised it. So it was most surprising when, nine months later, a babe was born in Balham.

No-one disapproved, they were a free and easy lot: they only minded a mystery, they hated not being told. But Betty Brown's only reply to every inquiry was: "Don't ask no questions and you won't be told no lies." She had hidden the pregnancy until the last moment, going on working for Nubroom and gasping about putting on so much weight.

There were plenty of bad jokes about an immaculate conception. Yet, as jokes will create truth, there were some who even began to believe it: the old girl looked so queenly, almost holy with her little dark-eyed babe beside her.

Immaculate? Knowing the facts, one might have guessed that this was at any rate the nearest thing to it: the contact had been so slight, the participants so implausible.

But such a guess would have been wrong. Though the episode might have been dreamed, though in a way it had insignificance, something like the residue of ash and stubs and broken beads left after Nubroom had swept through the pub that day—though it was thus disembodied, it for ever after left a strong mark on both Mrs. Brown's and Piero's minds.

Betty Brown never went back to the pub to find the father—it would, she knew, be quite ridiculous. But she often went back in her mind to the day when, as time embroidered the memory, a young handsome foreigner had made love to her, beat out his sudden heart for her, begged for her lips—and she, gracious

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and giving, had lost herself in his arms. Though every day she passed a dozen cafés full of exiled Italians pouring coffee and cutting sandwiches, it made no difference. Hers had been Romance, it was like in the pictures.

And Piero? He had known suddenly, wonderfully, the unsolicited gift of a complete real woman. Unbegged for, coming to him free and wanting and giving. It was a revelation, it was proof that such a thing *could really happen.* For ever after he was fortified: the legend of woman's impregnability quite disappeared, and this very lack of fear of failure made him doubly attractive.

Efficiently and quite kindly he went from job to job and from girl to girl in the full glory of youth. He never looked back—except sometimes to wonder at that monumental moment in the erupted suburb, at a warm fat angel with a golden halo who had suddenly appeared in his lonely bedroom, and at the English, anyway, unpredictable as the Chinese. © William Sansom 1966

"I forget what it's called. When taken, the little anvil in the head stops pounding."

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PETER USTINOV

THE SWISS WATCH

Another sparkling tale from the pen of this master of story-telling.

LIKE many other Italian women whom marriage has passed by, Pia Chiantella had gone abroad, a miniature Christopher Columbus, to escape from the real or imagined miseries of her homeland, and to make her living elsewhere. Too sentimental for bitterness, she worked in Paris as a daily help in the house of a French banker, Monsieur Petiton, who ignored most of her qualities—he just didn't have time to investigate them—but appreciated her honesty, a virtue towards which bankers have an extraordinary sensitivity, more especially on the level of petty cash and minute gestures of confidence.

When Christmas approached, the Petiton family made preparations, as always, to move to their chalet in Switzerland, a new and rather vulgar building conceived in the fertile imagination of Monsieur Petiton himself, who, as many self-made men, believed he knew more about architecture than those trained in it. The chalet stood on a sunless slope watching over a sunlit village, with something medieval about its arrogance and hostility, lightened only by lavish use of modern wrought iron on a background of pink Mediterranean stucco and pinewood, and by grounds peppered with hideous dwarfs and gnomes in coloured stone, and a handful of stylised rabbits and gigantic squirrels.

It was Madame Petiton who suggested that on this occasion

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they might take Pia with them, both as a reward and in order for her to do a great deal of hard work, helping to look after the four rebellious children which the banker had sired almost negligently in the midst of his multifarious activities. Monsieur Petiton agreed at once, and several days before Christmas the caravanserai left Paris, the family by fast train, Monsieur and Madame Petiton in their chauffeur-driven Cadillac.

Pia had the children all to herself on the first day up in the mountains, aided only by Madame Demoruz, a local lady who cleaned the chalet the year round, two hours a day. A kind of firm friendship was struck between these two, who had nothing in common, but then, the world over, firm friendships are formed for no reason at all except loneliness, especially if there is the cement of a sensed mutual unhappiness to lend poignancy to the unspoken moments.

The Cadillac had become ignominiously stuck in a snow-drift some sixty miles away, and Monsieur and Madame Petiton had been reduced to spending the first night of their holiday in a hotel on the banks of Lake Leman. The Dutch chauffeur, who might have been a hero in saving the huge car from a flood, was completely nonplussed by conditions in the mountains, which he had never seen before. It was typical of Monsieur Petiton to place his trust in foreign servants, believing in a remotely uneasy way that he sensed criticism from those of his own nationality, and allowing this complex free rein by declaring that the French could no longer be honoured with his esteem.

It was during this first evening alone in an overheated kitchen that Pia felt the exasperating solitude of all great public holidays. They tend to bring people together, and thereby leave people who are alone with nowhere to go. The children had been put to bed. They were running about upstairs with wild shrieks, but, officially, they had been put to bed. The parents were away, and they were not Pia's children. There was a Christmas tree in the village, lit with coloured lights. The snow was falling.

A lump formed in Pia's throat. She had agreed to go to Switzerland with a show of willingness and even of excitement, but that was merely her instinctive devotion to anyone who was kind to her. It had meant leaving her man in Paris. Her man (she called him *Il mio uomo*) was a spendthrift, reprobate ne'er-do-well of an Italian waiter who could never keep a place. Nothing really passed between them except money, of which she always had a little and of which he had none, but they talked in Italian and she felt sure of herself and even safe in his company.

There was something of the mysterious relationship between

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prostitute and pimp in their attachment, and now she wondered what he would be up to in Paris without her. He would probably get drunk, and in his festive stupor find another girl to protect.

In her mounting rage at these nagging thoughts, she switched on her little transistor radio, and found that the Italian network was broadcasting a performance of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in its entirety direct from La Scala. This didn't help matters. During the affecting scene in which Turiddu bids farewell to his mother, Pia broke down and wept, and having wept, she prayed. Deriving a little solace from the act of prayer, she began to think against the background of dramatic *verismo* at its most untrue.

She thought of her sister Margherita, who had been such a good companion until her marriage, but who subsequently seemed to adopt a condescending attitude towards her unmarried sister, and resented any contact, however formal, between her sons and their "aunt in domestic service". They were fine boys, Giorgio and Manlio, aged twenty-eight and twenty-six, even if they had not yet chosen professions for themselves. Of the two Manlio was easier to forgive for his indolence, because he was very handsome, while Giorgio was frankly ugly, but the fact was that both tended to lie about in the sun, little golden medals half embedded in their hairy chests, waiting for something to happen.

While they waited, they dreamed of emigrating to Australia, they dreamed of opening snack bars in Rome, they dreamed of winning the Giro d'Italia on their bicycles, but neither of them had the energy to cycle the distance of a block without lying down again and dreaming of something else—as often as not of the misery of Italy's deep south, with its ancient jealousies and age-old habits, its sickeningly blue sea and sky, and its servitude to the sun. Poor Italy and poor us, and yet, as is the way with those who are good for nothing, they never seemed to lack pocket money, although nobody ever knew where it came from or how much it amounted to.

Now, under the influence of Mascagni's musical excesses, Pia began to form a fierce and unreasoning love for these two boys who were of her blood by proxy, and who would surely have been hers if a capricious God had not decreed otherwise. She also developed a fierce hatred for the snow, that slippery apparel of the earth in high places, which hides its malice behind a show of innocence. She longed for the hot cracked earth which burned her bare feet, for the pungency of warm pines, and for the harsh smell of dried fish and herbs in the shops.

She retired to bed at the end of the opera, and entertained angry and emotional dreams.

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The next morning, after the arrival of Madame Demoruz, she took the opportunity of slipping down to the village. There was a shop at the other end of it which sold practically everything from coat hangers in the shape of reindeers' antlers to ski boots, and from lesser Swiss watches to wooden souvenirs. Here she bought Manlio a Christmas present, with a hundred and eighty francs and all her love. She didn't buy one for Giorgio for a variety of reasons. First of all, he was ugly, and if it came to the pinch, she would gladly surrender him to her sister, even in her imagination. Secondly, if she catered for Giorgio as well, she couldn't afford to buy a really fine present for Manlio. Lastly, Giorgio was the elder of the two, and could look after himself.

With the help of Monsieur Knüsperli, the shopkeeper, she selected an octagonal wristwatch which not only told the date, but had an alarm system as well. He packed it in a handsome box, decorated with a recurrent holly motif, and she mailed it to her nephew.

The Petitons arrived a few hours later, and life took on a routine: Monsieur Petiton going for long walks of a few hundred yards, armed with a stick and wearing a green Alpine trilby studded with shaving brushes and lucky favours; Madame Petiton, who was younger than her husband, skiing in the eternal company of a celebrated Alpine guide; and the children creating havoc on the nursery slopes, with the forlorn figure of Pia, dressed awkwardly in her city clothes, holding a sledge and an armful of garments at the bottom.

The days passed quickly, and soon the time came for school to begin again. Pia was asked to take the children back to Paris, where Miss Frazer, the Scottish nanny, was waiting for them after home leave for Christmas. The Petitons decided to stay on a little longer—she because the great guide had promised to show her some new tricks on the remoter slopes; he because he had found a non-skiing companion of the opposite sex in a neighbouring chalet. The Cadillac obediently awaited their fancy in the plain, so that Pia was compelled to take the squealing rabble back to the stern gaze and hard palm of Miss Frazer by night train.

She arrived in Paris in a state of physical and mental exhaustion to find a packet awaiting her. It was her watch back again, with an apologetic and uncertain note from Manlio, asking her if it were possible to exchange it for another model which didn't have an alarm, since this one had woken him up on occasion when he had least expected it, and he feared it might prove bad for his heart.

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The note was as short as one would expect from a person of his limited stamina, and he forgot to thank his aunt for her gift. She bore him no malice, since men don't have to remember such things as gratitude, but she racked her brains to think how she could possibly replace the watch now.

Eventually she put it back in an envelope and addressed it to Madame Demoruz, the only human contact she had made in the village. Cheerfully, she asked Madame Demoruz to take it back to Monsieur Knüsperli's shop, and to exchange it for a watch without an alarm. She said she was willing to honour any adjustment in price, but stated that in her opinion, a watch without an alarm should logically cost less than a watch with one. On the envelope she declared the contents of the envelope to be a "Gift of No Value," as she had been taught to do in Italy.

When Madame Demoruz received the watch, she took it to her husband to deal with. Since he was a man whose profession was officially that of a farmer, but who had always gone to great lengths not to possess a farm, he had more time on his hands than his wife, who slaved away cleaning four or five chalets a day in order to keep her family in pocket.

Monsieur Demoruz cast his great envious black eyes on the watch and rattled it. He set the alarm, and derived visible pleasure from hearing it ring. After he had repeated this process for over half an hour, Madame Demoruz permitted herself to warn him that he ran the risk of breaking it.

"Shut up," said Monsieur Demoruz, and downed another glass of Lie, a white liquor made from the sediment of grapes. His spirit fired, he put on his heavy farmer's boots, and walked down to the village to see Monsieur Knüsperli. There was no love lost between the two men. This had little to do with their characters, but more with tradition. For centuries the Demoruz and Knüsperli families had peopled this Alpine valley, with its indeterminate and special character, hemmed in between German, French and Italian worlds, and with the residue of lost Roman legions thrown in. They had intermarried and interdeceived each other, and yet, preposterously, they had maintained their own proud identities, together with a handful of other families. The phone book was dominated by six names. All the rest were outsiders or latecomers.

Now Monsieur Knüsperli looked up from his counter with undisguised displeasure as a Demoruz, never mind which one, entered his shop.

"What d'you want?" he asked, or rather, "What dost thou want?" to emphasise his annoyance.

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"It's a question of this watch," replied Monsieur Demoruz.

"What watch?"

"This one," said Monsieur Demoruz, opening the packet. "It was bought here by an Italian maid who works up at the banker's."

"Yes?"

"It's not what she wants."

"How d'you know?"

"She wrote my wife. She wants one without an alarm. I think she's crazy, mark you. It's a nice watch. I wouldn't mind having a watch like that."

"You could never afford a watch like that."

There was something about Knüsperli's tone which aggravated Demoruz, but that was nothing new.

"It's none of your business what I can and what I can't afford," he countered, "and you can be sure that if one day you see me with a watch like this, I won't have bought it here."

"What does this Italian woman want me to do?"

"I told you. What's the matter, you deaf or something? She wants to exchange it for one without an alarm."

"A cheaper one?"

"She said in her letter that she'd be willing to make an adjustment, but thought one without an alarm ought to cost less."

"That's not necessarily so," said Knüsperli, shaking his head. "No, not at all. Your white-gold Vacherin, biscuit-thin, hasn't an alarm or even the date, and yet it comes out about twenty times the cost of the Zona Wakemaster. It's a different class of timepiece altogether."

"I'm not saying I don't agree with you," declared Demoruz with a sly look, "but an Italian maid wouldn't want to go overboard, would she? And then," he added, with gratuitous malice, "you don't stock the really good watches, do you?"

"I have only to send a cable to any one of the major manufacturers to have any watch in any catalogue here tomorrow morning," snapped Knüsperli, riled.

"I'm prepared to believe you," replied Demoruz with his mocking sidelong look, "but you don't *stock* them, do you? I mean, the Italian maid couldn't come in here, could she, and say, Give me that Vacherin or that Piaget out of the window, could she, I mean?"

"She could if I showed her the catalogues. Yes, she could."

"But she didn't, did she? I mean, you didn't, did you? Show her the catalogues, I mean."

"What are you driving at?" asked Knüsperli coldly.

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A wild look of innocence burst on Demoruz's face.

"Driving at? I'm making conversation!"

Knüsperli frowned, and there was a long pause.

"You know what she did?" Demoruz went on in a voice suddenly small and moralising.

"Who?"

"The Italian maid."

"No."

"She sent the watch back in an ordinary envelope—unregistered, that is—and written on it was 'Gift of No Value'."

Knüsperli emitted a low whistle of disbelief.

"I've got the envelope here! I've brought it with me!" Demoruz cried, as he dug in his pocket for the evidence.

Knüsperli smoothed out the envelope, and then looked up, his own eye as dramatic in its smaller, sourer way as Demoruz's.

"Attempting to deceive the Swiss customs," he said.

"That's a federal offence!"

"I mean, if they'd opened the packet, it'd have meant confiscation, at least."

"Or a fine," added Demoruz, "or even prison. They're getting very tough these days. Or even all three of them, running concurrently. That's what happened to my wife's sister Edith. She got it concurrently. First time ever in the canton anyone ever got it concurrently. And she's a woman at that, although you'd never know it. What's more, your name's on the packet, see? That's the way they got my wife's sister too. She used to take things out of shops. What got her was the name of the shop on the bag. And such things get around. I mean, they get distorted. It starts out someone smuggled a watch bought at your shop, and by the time it's been the rounds, it's *you* who'd been smuggling watches *into* your shop."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Knüsperli, after a moment of dour reflection on these verities, "I'm not taking the watch back. It's been abroad. And it's come through customs with a false declaration of content. I'm not going to soil my hands."

"Quite right," agreed Demoruz. "And yet it's a lovely watch." He produced it and fondled it. "Though it seems to be dented . . . Look here."

"No," said Knüsperli. "That's a feature of the design. It's got a dent on the other side too, see?"

"Mm, I admit that, but this dent seems a bit bigger, doesn't it? The longer you stare at it, the bigger that dent becomes . . ."

The two men looked deep into each other's souls.

"Can you afford forty francs?" asked Knüsperli.

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"Can I afford forty francs?" laughed Demoruz.

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. I know you for what you are—a drunk . . . a wastrel . . . a disgrace to the entire valley."

"I can afford whatever I want for whatever I want whenever I want it," said Demoruz at the top of his voice. "The point is, do I *want* to afford forty francs?"

"Well, do you?"

"For this watch? Yes, I do."

"Right. Take it. But there's one condition."

"What's that?"

"Here's a watch worth forty francs. It's a Pomina Evergo, in a shockproof chromium-type case. For the price, it's good value. You send it to the woman, and tell her you picked it out yourself and that it's of equal value to the one she sent back. That's your responsibility."

"Done," whispered Demoruz, forking out forty francs in change which became smaller and smaller towards the end.

Knüsperli counted the money twice, and put it in the till.

"There's only one thing—" said Demoruz.

"Yes?"

"Who pays for the postage?"

Knüsperli thought quickly. He had made a good deal and wished to appear generous.

"We share the postage."

The two men shook hands.

Three days later, Pia received the substitute watch in Paris.

It had travelled in the same envelope, which had been re-addressed. Her claim that it contained a gift of no value was still written on it in her handwriting. The new watch looked suspiciously cheap to her, and when she tried to wind it, the winder dropped out. She took it quickly to a watchmaker, who told her it was hardly worth repairing, since the repairs, which would be frequent, would quickly amount to more than the cost of the watch. She asked him to put a value on it, but he told her he had had no experience with merchandise of that nature. When pressed, he thought twenty francs would be exorbitant.

Pia returned home in a fury, and in her desperation, she wrote a long letter to Monsieur Petiton, explaining the nature of the deceit to which she had fallen prey. Monsieur Petiton read the letter at breakfast, at first with amusement, but eventually with a welcome anger.

Frankly, Monsieur Petiton was bored with being up in the

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mountains. He disliked snow. What made it tolerable was the manner in which the women dressed to face it. He had a predilection for the smart blouses they liked to affect, and especially for the skin-tight après-ski pants, which featured the female figure in a way that was at once subtle in repose and gross in motion. He was the kind of voyeur who would never stoop to a keyhole. But even this innocuous pastime had now begun to pall. The telephone and the telex were not sufficient to engage his attention or to challenge his acumen. However, his profession was one which had made him conscious of fraud and transgression—in fact, he often fancied he recognised symptoms where none existed. Now Pia's letter came to him like a chance bone to a somnolent dog. He decided to deal with the problem and mobilised all his vast and bitter experience in the field of mortal duplicity in order to carry out his delicate charge.

He entered Knüsperli's shop just before lunch, when Madame Knüsperli was helping her husband out.

Knüsperli quickly abandoned a couple of other customers, and smiled egregiously at his distinguished client.

"It isn't often we have the honour to see you in person, Monsieur Petiton," he said. "I trust there is no complaint about the ski boots for your son?"

"I didn't even know they had been purchased in this shop," Petiton replied.

"Oh, yes . . . we have fitted the entire family. In fact, Madame was in here only yesterday with her monitor, selecting some more advanced skis. I suggested Lone Eagles—the Champion's favourite . . ."

Petiton looked at him sharply.

"I am not here in order to effect a purchase," he said. "On the contrary, I want some money out of you."

"Out of me?" Knüsperli paled.

"There is the question of a watch," Petiton went on, in his quiet, efficient way.

"A watch? I don't seem to remember—"

"On the contrary, I have reason to believe you know exactly what I mean. My maid bought a watch here—"

"An Italian lady? Oh, yes—" Knüsperli's affected innocence compelled him to be as helpful as possible.

"Precisely. An Italian lady. She bought a watch here for one hundred and eighty francs."

"It actually cost one hundred and ninety-eight francs, Monsieur, but I made a special price for her."

"That was most generous of you, I'm sure. We will consider

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now whether your subsequent actions were motivated by the same spirit of generosity. I understand that the watch in question proved unsuitable, and so she sent it back to you with the idea of exchanging it—a practice which is normal in all the better shops."

"I agree, Monsieur."

"I am glad to hear it. In fact, you proved your point by sending her in exchange a watch worth about twenty French francs... about eighteen Swiss francs at the present rate of exchange—"

"Oh, Monsieur, I protest! Who valued the watch?"

Monsieur Petiton consulted a piece of paper on which he had prepared his brief.

"The firm of Augier, Dupont et Fils, 118, Boulevard de la Victoire, in Paris, the official agency for at least three reputable Swiss watches."

"But, Monsieur, the watch is a Pomona Evergo!"

"I've never heard of such a company," said Monsieur Petiton, "and I do a great deal of work with the major companies in Geneva and in La Chaux-de-Fonds. However, it is always possible that there is a deficiency in my knowledge. In that case, all you have to do is to produce the Pomona catalogue, and we will see together how much you owe my maid."

Knüsperli faltered, especially now that his wife was listening.

"The Pomona people don't put out a catalogue," he said.

"Why not? Isn't it usual business practice?"

"I don't know, Monsieur. They're a curious company in many respects."

"I can well believe it. Perhaps you could give me their address and telephone number so that we can clear this matter up."

"I don't have their address on me."

"Then how do you get the watches?" asked Monsieur Petiton. "You don't make them yourself, by any chance?"

"I'll be frank with you, Monsieur—"

"Ah, at last."

"What's the matter, Heinrich?" asked Madame Knüsperli.

"Nothing. Nothing's the matter." He leaned forward. "You have in your employ a certain Madame Demoruz, who cleans your chalet in your absence."

"That is correct."

"When your Italian maid selected the one-hundred-and-eighty-franc watch—"

"And paid for it!"

"I'm not saying she didn't! I never said that! Never, Monsieur!"

"All right, go on . . ."

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"She—the maid, that is—sent the watch away to Italy, I believe, as a present. This present turned out not to be suitable. Instead of sending it back to me, as she should have done, she sent it to Madame Demoruz, who gave it to her husband, whose name is Monsieur Demoruz."

"That seems logical."

"Now this Monsieur Demoruz came down to see me, and point blank refused to surrender the watch. He said it wasn't a new watch any more, since he was wearing it. He also pointed out that it had been dented in transit. What was I to do? I couldn't afford to be out of pocket. I told him to buy the maid another watch and to sort it out with her, since she had sent him the watch in the first place. He selected the Pomona Evergo, which he said was suitable. He paid for it. Both watches have been paid for, and as far as I am concerned, it's a closed chapter. People come in here all the time and buy things, and so long as they pay, I'm not going to concern myself with what happens to the merchandise once it has left the shop. After all, I'm not a charitable institution!"

"Very well," Monsieur Petiton said quietly, "I have your story. All I can tell you is that someone will be compelled to pay up the difference between eighteen and one hundred and eighty francs, and the next time you see me I may well be accompanied by a gendarme."

"The watch cost forty francs, Monsieur, not eighteen!"

"I prefer to believe the assessment of a reputable watchmaker, especially since you seem unable to put your hands on any official Pomona price list. *Bon appétit*."

"Damn Demoruz!" shouted Knüsperli after Petiton had gone, but his show of fire didn't prevent him from being scolded by his wife in a most degrading fashion.

Petiton lunched at the ski club, and watched the elegant ladies parade before him. After lunch, he returned to his chalet, knowing that Madame Demoruz would be cleaning there.

"Your husband has a handsome new watch, I am told," he said, apparently reading *Le Figaro*.

"A new watch, Monsieur? I really haven't noticed."

"Oh, come, come, Madame Demoruz—of course you've noticed. By the brilliant manner in which you winkle out every speck of dirt in this chalet, I can see that you notice everything."

"He may have a watch, but it isn't new," said Madame Demoruz doggedly.

"Not new? How old is it? A couple of weeks, shall we say?"

"What are you getting at, Monsieur?"

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"Just this, Madame Demoruz," he replied, looking straight at her almost kindly. "Pia sent you a watch she had bought for her nephew and which had been found unsuitable, didn't she?"

"That's right."

"Perhaps you'd care to continue telling the story yourself from there on?"

"Why, what's up?"

"I'll tell you when you've finished."

Madame Demoruz shrugged her shoulders. She certainly behaved in a less suspicious manner than Monsieur Knüsperli, but then she was a woman, Monsieur Petiton reflected, and even if there is not enough beauty to be shared by the sisterhood, the art of lying is a mine of inexhaustible profusion.

"When Pia sent me the watch, I gave it to my husband, naturally. I haven't got time to do more than my work. That evening, when I saw my husband, I remarked on the watch on his wrist, and asked him how he'd got hold of it. 'Well,' he said, 'Knüsperli refused point-blank to take it back.' 'Oh,' I said, 'so he gave it to you.' 'No,' he said, 'it's been paid for. He can't keep it, especially since he won't take it back, so somebody's got to have it.' 'Well,' I said, 'Pia paid for it—she ought to have it.' 'But she doesn't want it,' he said. 'I've got a letter telling us that much.' 'That's all very well,' I said, 'but she wanted another one.' 'I know that,' he said, 'and out of the goodness of my heart,' he said, 'I bought her one. It cost me all of forty francs.' 'Forty francs!' I said. 'Well, thirty,' he said. 'You can't buy a decent watch for thirty francs,' I said. 'Well, forty,' he said. So he needn't have bought Pia anything, you see, Monsieur. It was, as he said, out of the goodness of his heart.

"He didn't wish her to go empty-handed, she being a foreigner, you see, Monsieur, and not Swiss."

"In other words, Madame Demoruz, you maintain that Monsieur Knüsperli refused to take the watch back?"

"That's what my husband told me," said Madame Demoruz, one of her lips quivering in premature outrage.

"Well, Monsieur Knüsperli maintains that your husband refused to give the watch up."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Madame Demoruz, searching for an inflection which would do full justice to the sacrilege.

"I am not calling anyone a liar." Monsieur Petiton remarked coolly. "All I am interested in is the reimbursement of a sum which I estimate at one hundred and sixty-two francs, and I will go to the gendarmerie this afternoon."

Monsieur Demoruz was at Monsieur Knüsperli's shop when

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Monsieur Petiton arrived with the gendarme, Broglio, who was a cousin of Knüsperli and a nephew of Demoruz, and who had reason to mistrust both. Madame Demoruz had hurried home and told her husband what Monsieur Petiton had said. Monsieur Demoruz, who could always be found at home during the day, bestirred himself and, bellowing with rage, rampaged down to the village. Now he and Knüsperli were frozen like statues at the height of their argument.

They both greeted the gendarme by saying, "*Adieu*, Jules," rather sullenly. The gendarme took off his cap in order to keep the row within the family.

"Shall I start?" asked Monsieur Petiton.

"I already have cognizance of the facts, Monsieur," said the gendarme.

"You have conizance of the two different stories, Monsieur le gendarme. It is up to us, to you, to unravel the facts," corrected Monsieur Petiton.

"As you wish, Monsieur," said the gendarme, who struggled to hide his slow-wittedness behind an affectation of weariness. Slowly he took out a pad, licked his finger, and found the appropriate place after a lengthy examination of a blank sheet of paper.

"Where is the watch?" he inquired.

"Which watch?" asked Knüsperli.

"I understand this contention is on the subject of a watch," said the gendarme.

"There are two watches."

"Two watches," agreed Monsieur Demoruz passionately.

"Two watches?" The gendarme looked at Monsieur Petiton as though he had been told an untruth.

"If there are as many as two watches this may be a matter for headquarters," he said.

"I told you the whole story in your office," Monsieur Petiton remarked with elaborate patience.

"I know that, Monsieur. I'm not an imbecile, you know."

"Of course not."

"You stated that an Italian lady, Chiantella, Pia, in service with you at Number 91 *bis*, Avenue Foch, Paris, Seine, France, had bought a watch—*one* watch (he emphasised powerfully)—one watch, at the shop of Monsieur Knüsperli, Heinrich, for a sum of one hundred and eighty francs—"

"Swiss francs," interrupted Monsieur Petiton.

"Since we are on Swiss soil, Monsieur, francs will be taken to mean Swiss francs unless specified as being French. On receiving

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the watch, she decided that it would be unsuitable, and sent it to Madame Demoruz, Irène, of the Chalet Souriante Colline in this village, for her to take and exchange for a watch of similar value or less without an alarm attachment. Whatever transpired, she received in return a watch in a chromium-type case claimed to be a Pomona Evergo, estimated by the firm of Augier, Dupont et Fils of 118, Boulevard de la Victoire in Paris, as worth twenty French francs, without any reimbursement for the difference in price. The watch in question, when wound, refused to go, and the winder fell to the floor. Is that correct?"

"That is correct," agreed Monsieur Petiton.

"Then it is a question of only one watch," said the gendarme, "since it was not the intention of Mademoiselle Chiantella, Pia, to purchase more than one."

"She hardly expected to receive one at the cost of another, more expensive one—therefore the case involves two watches," argued Monsieur Petiton.

"Did she expect to own two watches?" asked the gendarme.

"Of course not."

"Then it is a case involving *one* watch," he insisted. "You wish her to pay the correct sum for the Pomona Evergo?"

"Yes."

"Then that is the watch which concerns us here."

"But she has already paid for the more expensive watch!" cried Monsieur Petiton, losing his composure.

The gendarme sighed. "Who is conducting this inquiry, Monsieur, you or I?"

"You are," agreed Monsieur Petiton, with evident regret.

"Very well, then." The gendarme faced Knüsperli and Demoruz. "Now, when Demoruz, Albert, brought in the watch to you, Knüsperli, Heinrich, did you refuse to take it back?"

"I did not," stated Knüsperli, categorically.

"That's a brazen lie!" shouted Demoruz, banging his gnarled fist on the glass counter.

"Take that back," flared Knüsperli, "or leave the shop!"

"Nobody's leaving the shop while I'm here," said the gendarme. "You were willing to take the watch back?"

"As Monsieur Petiton pointed out, it is normal business practice."

"Then why didn't you take it back?"

"Demoruz refused to surrender it."

"As God is my witness," roared Demoruz, bringing down his fist again, and this time breaking the glass on the counter, "as God is my witness, that is a stinking lie. The Italian woman sent

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the watch back in an ordinary envelope marked 'Gift of No Value' in an evident plan to defraud the federal customs."

The gendarme's eyebrows shot up to meet his hairline. "Are you making this part of the record?" he asked.

"Yes, I am!"

"Prove it!" cried Petiton.

"I *can* prove it, and will!"

"Produce the envelope!"

The steam suddenly vanished from Demoruz's boiler. "Oh, no," he said, "I used the same envelope to send the other watch back . . ."

"Still allegedly marked 'Gift of No Value'?"

"I . . . I don't remember."

"So much for the high moral principles of these people," Petiton declaimed.

"At least it was a cheaper watch!" yelled Demoruz. "A much cheaper watch! It really was a gift of no value."

"Ah, you agree!"

"Of course I agree."

"An admission at last," said Petiton, satisfied.

"I never denied it was a cheaper watch," warned Monsieur Knüsperli.

"You evaded the issue every time I asked you its worth," accused Petiton.

"Forty francs he charged me, while you tell me, Monsieur, it's only worth twenty!" Demoruz howled.

"And who's going to pay for the damage to my counter?" Knüsperli roared back.

"Gentlemen," said the gendarme, with that pained dignity which schoolmasters use in order to impress on their pupils that they are disappointed in them, "gentlemen, what is at stake here, as I see it, is not so much a few francs as the honour of the commune." With an instinct shrewder than his conscious thought, he made a move to shift the discussion on to the plane of pride and away from the facts, of which he understood not one. Knüsperli was the quicker of the two litigants to realise that an escape road was being opened for him.

"I'm not a fool," he said, suddenly reasonable. "I value Monsieur Petiton as a customer more than I value a slight extra profit, and I care for my reputation even more deeply. This shop was opened in 1902, by my grandfather—"

"You take after him, the old bastard," said Demoruz.

Knüsperli brushed aside the insult with a sadly indulgent smile. "—And we have served the community faithfully ever since," he

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went on, "so that I am prepared, if all the parties are willing, to reimburse the difference in price myself. The sum in question is one hundred and forty francs. Is that agreeable to everyone?"

"You can't do that!" cried Demoruz. "Don't you think I can see through you, you hypocrite? You're trying to put me in the wrong!"

"Perhaps you're willing to join me? We'll put down seventy francs each," smiled Knüsperli.

"You think I'm an idiot or something?" growled the cornered Demoruz. He looked at the others, and then back at the hated Knüsperli, who was smiling still, a meaningless, fixed, maddening smile.

"I won't pay a centime," Demoruz said in anger, "but you're all mad if you think I'll continue to sully my wrist with this tainted watch!" He took it off, and placed it on the cracked counter. "There!"

"I wouldn't touch that watch now. You take it right out of here, and I never want to see either of you again."

Demoruz looked hunted and outdignified. Suddenly, foolishly, he held it out to the gendarme.

"Are you trying to bribe me, Uncle Albert?" asked the gendarme coldly. "I'm on duty, you know."

Desperately Demoruz presented it to Monsieur Petiton who waved it away impatiently.

"I've got more watches than I know what to do with," he said, "and of better quality than that."

"All right!" shouted Demoruz, who suddenly saw daylight. "Tell you what, I'll send it back to the Italian woman, and I'll declare what it is and its value on the envelope. That's what I'll do. The rest of you do what you damn well please!"

"Does that satisfy you, Monsieur?" the gendarme asked Petiton.

Petiton was frankly a little disappointed by these unexpected fireworks of generosity. He had not foreseen them, since they never occurred in the field of investment banking.

"I suppose the solution is reasonable," he said, "although the palpable attempt to defraud a domestic servant is going unpunished. If I hadn't taken the matter in hand, we could today be confronted by a grave example of social injustice."

"How much do you pay the Italian?" asked Demoruz, his eyes huge and ironical.

"That is, I suggest, none of your business," Petiton replied cuttingly.

"While we're talking about social injustice, I thought I'd bring

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it up," Demoruz added. "I just hope it's a bit more than the miserly pittance you pay my wife. Six francs an hour. He's stinking rich, rolling in money, and he pays the lowest wage in the whole damned village. And my wife's been far from well recently. Easy on the social injustice, Monsieur. Easy on it."

Petiton flushed with anger.

Knüsperli came to his help. "Six francs an hour? That means it took your poor wife over six and a half hours to buy you that watch. You'd better go easy on the social injustice, too, Albert."

"I'll kill you if you call me by my first name! I'm Monsieur Demoruz to you, you scum!"

The gendarme separated them, and frog-marched Demoruz unsteadily and elaborately back to his chalet. That evening Demoruz got drunk. There was a ferocious sense of frustration on the boil in his heart. He hated everybody, hit his wife, and drank his Lie straight from the bottle. The front of his shirt was wet from the times he missed his mouth. When his wife put his meal before him, he threw it across the room. He lit a vile cigar, and it soon made him sick to the stomach, so he threw it out of the window. It landed on a pile of straw, which soon began to smoulder and then burn, in spite of the cold.

Madame Demoruz was the first to smell the burning, and she rushed out with a pail of water, but the wind blew some bits of flaming straw against the walls of the old barn, which quickly took fire. The local firemen, volunteers all, appeared on the scene when the barn was already an empty shell. They were never very quick off the mark on these occasions, because of their insistence on appearing at the scene of a conflagration in uniform.

All they could do was to abandon the barn to its fate, and to throw snow against the walls of the chalet in case the wind should change direction.

Demoruz stood and watched, a fiendish expression on his face. He muttered the one word "Knüsperli," relieved himself on the embers, took an axe out of the woodshed, and reeled down to the village. There he destroyed the window of Knüsperli's shop, and offered no resistance to the gendarme when the latter came to arrest him.

Relatively sober the next morning, he refused to believe that Knüsperli hadn't set fire to the barn. "He had it in for me, because I showed him up for what he is!" he repeated endlessly.

Knüsperli proved that he was in the café playing cards with relatives, but Demoruz insisted that these relatives had to be liars if they were relatives of Knüsperli. He even claimed he had

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seen various suspicious characters flitting about in the twilight while he was eating his supper, and remembered that he had said to his wife, "That's funny. Those people running about in the dark outside look like Knüsperli's relatives. They've no business out there."

Madame Demoruz agreed rather shamefacedly to everything her husband alleged, and explained her black eye by saying that she slipped and fell while trying to identify Knüsperli's relatives in the dark.

Knüsperli resorted to the law in his exasperation, but while these due processes were tortuously under way, Demoruz was manhandled in the dark and left bleeding one night on his way from the café, an empty bottle of Lie in his hand. Soon after, the tyres of Knüsperli's car were found gashed in the morning. It became clear to the gendarme that factions had been formed, and that the venerable hatreds of the valley had been revived. Rather than resorting to Lausanne, and dragging all these sinister happenings into the open to the degradation of the village, he convened a meeting of the elders.

The *doyen*, Monsieur Willy Demoruz-Knüsperli, who was related to everyone's relatives, and who was ninety-two years old, put forward his views at this meeting. He stood up, his sparse hair standing like a field of exclamation marks on a red and freckled soil; his Alpine eyes, blue suns setting in rivers with scarlet banks; his nose, a crystal drop trembling among the hairs of its prow; his carelessly shaved neck rising to his jaw in a series of corrugations; his toothless gums biting on memories, and he spoke.

"To destroy each other's goods is as blind as destroying one's own. We are here, by God's will, to live in peace. We fought all our wars at the beginning of history. We have learned to do without. God, in his infinite mercy, gave us high mountains to protect ourselves, good cows to milk, good wood to build with. And, as if that were not enough, He even sent us foreigners to exploit. We have everything we need, and more. But I tell you, if now we have fallen out among ourselves, it is only because there are two uneasy consciences at the root of the trouble. I won't say who is right and who is wrong. It takes two uneasy consciences to make the kind of unpleasantness we've been having. One is not enough.

"I've no more to say, except that it will serve us right if the Almighty, whose wisdom passeth all understanding, takes away the foreigners. Then we'll be reduced to exploiting each other as we did when we still had wars."

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"Why do we see you so rarely in church?" asked the priest, smiling, when the meeting was over.

"Don't like it. Bores me. Sleep better at home," murmured the old man.

Meanwhile Pia, in Paris, was amazed and gratified not only to have her money refunded, but to receive both watches as well. She sent the valuable one back to Manlio in a fresh envelope marked "Gift of No Value," explaining to him that the shop refused to take it back, and that it had cost her a lot of money, and that every time the alarm rang he should think of the love which had motivated its being sent. The other watch she sent to Giorgio.

When she went back to Italy in the summer, she noticed that the two boys hadn't changed. Giorgio was as ugly as ever, Manlio perhaps even more beautiful. Only the bicycles seemed to have aged a bit.

"Well, and how are the watches?" she asked.

The boys looked at one another.

"Mine arrived broken," said Giorgio.

"*Porca la miseria*," Pia grumbled, "you can't trust the posts. It left Paris in perfect condition."

"Zannonelli said it wasn't worth mending."

"As bad as that?" moaned Pia. "*Madonna*. And yours?" she smiled winningly at Manlio.

"Mine? I lost it."

"Lost it! You're lying!" Pia accused.

Manlio shrugged his shoulders in a noncommittal way.

In a fury, Pia took him by his bare arms, and shook him. "Where is it?" she screeched.

"I sold it," Manlio said, only half apologetic. "I needed the money more than the watch. I sold it to an American sailor."

"How much for?" Pia whispered dramatically.

"Four thousand lire."

Pia slapped his face so violently that it had to be a gesture of love. "*Mascalzone*!" she cried. "You sold it for less than I paid for it!"

Manlio shrugged his shoulders again, and lay down in the sun.

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Look for next month's Ustinov, a sad but funny tale of a famous Hungarian operetta singer who sees life through rose-coloured spectacles.

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For A Song

BY GERALD KERSH

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OH, THOSE cabbages of jade, those hand-carved coral carrots, those nacreous turnips and scallions of moonstone! *Aïe*, the bronze onions and the ruby beefsteaks trimmed with ivory! Madame, that isn't a supermarket, it is a robbers' cave—in the fairytale sense of the term, I mean; a treasure-house. I could walk about there for hours, simply picking things up and putting them down again. Cosmetics fit for Cleopatra—lotions to make you white, lotions to make you brown, essences to make you smell, pastes to take the smell away—everything. Even at my age I cannot resist the toys. Impossible puzzles to take your mind off probability; machine-guns and moon rockets for the boys; and for the girls non-inflammable babies that cry *Mamma* and drink water and have to be changed.

Which reminds me, madame, that I came to talk of your young daughter. Much as I need the money you pay me to teach her the piano, honesty compels me to tell you that a hundred teachers with a hundred pianos could not make a pianist of her—not in a hundred years. Little Dora won't *catch fire*, as the great Marek Fischer was wont to say. I studied under Fischer, you know, and he was a pupil of the immortal Liszt.

Fischer said to me once, "Your rendering of Op. 64 Number 3 makes Chopin turn in his grave less uneasily than usual." This was an accolade from Marek Fischer—he distrusted lady musicians. My career was interrupted by the First World War, when I became a nurse. My father, Colonel Morlaine, was killed at Verdun. In 1919 I had to go home to Maupart-sur-Vase to look after my ailing mother.

Now, my dear, old Maupart is one of those bits of creation which seem to lie under a species of curse. Nothing nice ever seems to happen there. In the spring it floods, in the summer it parches, in the autumn it rots, and in the winter it freezes hard. Over two thousand years, invaders of France have found in Maupart a strategic point. Heaven knows why anybody ever elected to live there! Everybody has ague for Easter and rheumatism for Christmas. At the best of times, the surrounding countryside is awfully poor. But in 1919 conditions were absolutely terrible.

So, although I have lived many years in America, your supermarkets have for me an enchantment impossible to convey. We were speaking of supermarkets, I think? Excuse me; I have a roundabout way of talking. You complain with everybody else that a dollar does not go as far as it used to.

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Well, imagine that your dollar couldn't go anywhere at all; that there was nothing for you to buy with paper money; that you go to buy a pound of meat for a dollar, and the storekeeper says, "I don't want any more dollars, but I can let you have some soup-bones if you give me the glass out of your windows."

In Maupart, after World War One, it was like that. The village was a desolation. Nearly all the young men were gone. Only old people and children were left to shiver in the cold ruins. The farms, never prosperous, were blasted by neglect. Such crops as had been available were commandeered in exchange for scrip—everybody had paper francs, chits, receipts, acknowledgements, and such like play-money; but nothing to eat and nothing to barter. All around, the frozen marshes; and over all, the snow. Not the pretty snow of the Christmas cards, but a different sort of snow—as soon as you stepped out of doors, it was as if a hangman had pulled a white hood over your head; the ground gave way like a scaffold, and a raw noose of cold nipped your throat.

Our old servant Marie-Celeste—one of those good, tough, cantankerous women who come to work for you at the age of eleven and grow into a state of symbiosis with your family—took me aside and told me, "Your mamma doesn't know how bad things actually are. Maupart is empty. I had to go as far away as Bassinville to find a lump of bacon, some potatoes, and a few dried vegetables for soup—and for that I paid with our gilt clock; the one with Cupid sucking his thumb on top. Mam'selle Germaine, you're the clever one. Think of something. There never was a Christmas yet when we didn't give the villagers a treat."

"Is there no more wine?" I asked.

"Plenty. I buried the best of the Colonel's sealed stuff. But no bread. As the saying goes:

Save your wine to moisten your bread,
Blood without body will trouble your head

and bread is scarce as diamonds now... You didn't bring back any jewellery, by any chance, Mam'selle Germaine?"

"Oh sure," I said, "they pay Red Cross nurses in diamonds; everybody knows that. Talk sense, Marie-Celeste!"

"You *had* jewels," she said accusingly.

"There was a war on. I sold them."

"What did you do with the money?"

"I gave it to the poor. And don't start telling me that you haven't had any wages since 1914," I said. "You have been

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dismissed for insolence at least fifty times since 1895—you should have gone when you were fired. What about your savings, anyway?"

"And what do you think your mamma and I have been living on?" she asked. "My savings are spent. The furniture is going now. Poor Madame Morlaine doesn't know. I counted on you. You gave to the poor! What are we?"

"We are not poor; we are impoverished," I said, trying to put a good face on the situation. "There is a difference. There's still two days before Christmas. If only I could get to Paris and back in time, my friends—" Then I stopped short, remembering that I didn't know where my friends were, now; whether they were rich or poor, alive or dead.

My heart sank. My mind became quite empty of ideas. Then, as we sat and looked at each other, there was a knock at the outer door. Marie-Celeste smoothed her apron and went to answer it. She returned, saying, "A gentleman with a portmanteau."

"If it is Father Christmas, tell him to come down the chimney in the usual fashion," I said. "What does he want?"

"He says he is Monsieur Jean Carabon, and he wants you."

I leapt up and ran to the door, crying, "Carabon? Impossible!"

Jean Carabon, in 1914, was one of the greatest singers in France—a baritone with a voice like a Stradivarius cello. Everybody swore he was crazy, for at the outbreak of war he had torn up his contract and joined the army as an ordinary rifleman. "We'll be in Berlin in a month," he assured us, "and then I'll come back to the cage and chirp for you. Meanwhile—" And off he went, leaving a few broken hearts behind him, I can assure you, for he was a big, handsome man, and had a sweet nature.

I said to the man in the passage, "Put Monsieur Carabon's bag down," and went to the door. The street was empty. I turned. The gaunt, grey visitor said, in a hollow voice, "I am Jean Carabon, Germaine." He tried to laugh. "A little the worse for wear," he went on. "They said I should go to the country, rest a little, feed up on cream and eggs and butter and beef. So I thought at once of Germaine Morlaine, for they told me you had come home; and here I am to share your bounteous country Christmas, my dear."

I whispered to Marie-Celeste, "Put another cup of water in the soup," and led him into the sitting room. I might have wept to see the wreck which had been Carabon, if my mother

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had not come down just then. Poor darling, the death of my father had unsettled her mind a little; she had retreated, with dignity, into the peaceful and gracious past. A successful strategic withdrawal, bless her heart!

She had heard of Carabon, of course. "It is gracious of you to come to sing a *Gloria* and a *Noël* for our poor people at Maupart," she said, "in memory of Colonel Morlaine. They have so little to lift up their hearts, I am told, this Christmas; so many of their loved ones being absent . . ." So she talked on, sipping a cup of hot milk—dehydrated milk in hot water, but thank God she could not tell the difference so long as she drank out of her blue Sèvres cup.

After she had withdrawn, and I had got her comfortably to sleep, Carabon said to me, "A pretty *Noël* I shall sing, my dear! Do you hear how I talk?"

Yes, indeed I heard how he talked, and I knew that strange metallic croak behind his voice. "I was a nurse," I said, trying not to cry and succeeding, "I know. You were gassed."

"A whiff of phosgene," said Carabon, "at Ypres. And a little shell-shock."

"Then I'm not going to let you try to sing," I said.

"I shall sing. I *will* sing if I burst," said he, setting his jaw. All Paris knew Carabon's jaw; when it set like that you could no more get him off what he had set his mind to than you can budge an embattled bulldog. "Yes," he said, "to the splendour of God I will sing a *Gloria*—and long live Christmas!"

This, coming from a singer who had lost his voice, took my breath away. I gave him hot wine to sip.

He said, "A glass of wine, and an egg to suck—I ask no more. Leave the rest to me."

I took Marie-Celeste aside and asked, "Where can we get some fresh eggs?"

She said, "Nowhere. Dried eggs, perhaps. But there isn't a shell-egg in the whole countryside. This I know for a fact." She had an afterthought, "Unless one tries the old witch Lagrue of the Devil's Swamp. But nobody dares do that."

I said, "Marie-Celeste, if a man with a broken voice can keep an unbroken spirit and has the will to sing a *Gloria*, I have the will to go to the witch Lagrue and get eggs if the Devil himself is sitting on them!"

"You shouldn't talk like that, Germaine."

"You should tend field surgery for forty hours under a high explosive barrage, and then you wouldn't mind the

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Devil," I said. "Stay here and keep Mamma and Carabon warm if you have to chop up the chairs for firewood. I'll be off before dawn."

"You'll get lost," she whimpered.

"I know the paths through the marshes," I told her. "The poachers taught me when I was a little girl."

"You never told me that."

"You never asked me."

The old woman Lagrue struck terror into the little community at Maupart because she was old and ugly, never went to church, and shunned mankind by living in the most dangerous part of that very uninviting region. She had her hut in the gut of the Devil's Swamp, so called because it was shifty and dangerous. In the warm weather it put on an appetising, verdant appearance, looking so firm that people and beasts were tempted to walk there. Two steps into that green velvet, and the swamp, with a giggle, took you feet first and drank you down. It was no better in winter. Fast-running water underground allowed only a skin of ice on the surface, but this skin was grey and massive-looking as a paving-stone. Step aside, and—*crack*—there you were again.

So, when an occasional drought parched the area, the Devil's Swamp was a place of skulls and crossbones. Bony sockets glared at the passer-by through tangles of dead roots like fingers with too many knuckles. I had never seen the witch Lagrue—even the poachers I had known in my childhood, twenty years before, gave her a wide berth. They said she had sold herself to the Devil. If this were so, I thought, keeping carefully to the just-submerged stepping-stones I so vividly remembered, the Devil runs a sweatshop. Lagrue's was a wretched way of living. Seen through the dawn mist her hut looked like nothing I had ever seen before. It was a conglomeration of hutches and coops clustered about a frightful hovel made of dead wood and flattened tin cans, shaped like a fat man's fist, and with a stovepipe waggling a warning to me to mind my own business.

Still, I knocked at the wall—I could find no door—and the witch Lagrue appeared at a window. Imagine a chicken with matted grey hair—a chicken with hair and a chin; under the beak a kind of mouth like a walnut turned inside-out; and over the frightened yellow eyes, tufted red eyebrows. The beak opened and a chicken's voice came out saying, "Go to the Devil!"

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I replied, "I am told you have some eggs. I can pay."

A scuffling noise, and then a bit of the wall swings inwards. The old woman beckons with a thick-nailed yellow finger.

"Louder," says she, "I'm deaf."

And here's another situation: I am trying to enlist the aid of a deaf woman for a singer who can't sing!

I went into the witch's hut. It was almost totally dark, and it smelled abominably of sick birds and feathers.

"*Eggs!*" I shouted.

She caught the word, or the shape of it, and it seemed to make her angry. "Look," she said, picking up a lamp consisting of a bit of rag burning in melted fat—chicken-fat by the smell of it—and handed about the hut a few rays of its greasy light. I saw dozens of cages lining the walls, but they were not all for chickens. I remember seeing moorhens, a snipe, and a young heron; a family of rabbits, a hedgehog, a colony of field-mice. "They run away where men can't follow," she said. "So do I. They'd sooner die in the swamp. So would I. But I find 'em out and I nurse 'em nice and I send 'em home—"

I can change my tactics if I must.

"I am a nurse," I yelled in her ear, "and I must have eggs! EGGS!"

She screamed back, pointing to the black, dead stove, "Fire, fire!" I noticed, then, that in spite of the stuffiness of the place it was very dank and cold. She offered me a scaly hand to feel. It was lifelessly cold. "Give me wood for my stove, and you may have an egg," she said.

I took off my woollen gloves and offered them to her, asking if they would do instead. "I must keep them *all* warm," she said, making a comprehensive gesture. "I must have fire in the stove."

"Take the gloves," I said, "and I'll find wood for your stove, eggs or no eggs." And I knew then why wild people have reverence for those whom Allah has touched in the head; although I did not know whether Lagrue or I was the crazier of us two. "Wait," I said, going out, putting my hands in my pockets for warmth. "I get you wood, you give me eggs." As if she were going away.

I was determined that Carabon should have his *Gloria*, you see.

Even the Devil's Swamp was God's fresh air after Lagrue's hut. But I thought, sympathising with the poor old soul, *Why not? She has made of her lonely little house a haven for*

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frightened beasts. Does an air-raid shelter smell sweeter? She wants comfort for her birds. Then she shall have it!

And I turned my face into the wind, which was north-easterly, and picked my steps into the scrubby wood which bordered that side of the swamp. The wood belonged to a smallholder, as I remembered. He would surely sell me a load of firewood either for paper money or credit? But when I got to the place where the birch trees and the other ghostly trees had once been, there was nothing but a hooked promontory studded with black stumps like the jaw of a hippopotamus. The earth was cut and ridged so that the little farmhouse might have been balanced on the back of some monstrous crocodile. I knew the marks: tanks had passed.

I called out, "Hey there! Is Charles Bonheur at home?"

Bonheur came to the door with that kind of angry-guilty look fat men have when they are surprised in the act of eating. "It's Mam'selle Morlaine!" he cried. His wasp of a wife came out of an inner room with a buzz and a hum, and convoyed me into a kitchen. She could not offer me coffee, she said, but she had roasted barley; she could not offer me tea, but she could brew birch bark with honey—

"Honey?" I said, thinking of Carabon's throat.

"We have a comb or two left," said Bonheur.

"Sell me some," I said.

Fat Bonheur said, "Mam'selle Morlaine, for you—anything. We'll give you some, eh?"

I said, "It isn't for me. But a famous singer, Jean Carabon has come to Maupart to sing us a *Gloria* for Christmas, and he has a slight disorder of the throat. I have been a nurse, you know, and there is nothing like honey and fresh eggs for a singer's throat—that and warmth. The honey I accept, my dear Bonheur, in the spirit in which it is offered, and bless you for it. What I really wanted, though, was a cord of firewood."

"We have scarcely enough for ourselves," said Mme. Bonheur. "I suffer dreadfully with the cold. Bonheur doesn't feel it—like a whale, he has a natural coat of blubber. But I undergo the torments of the damned. It is my circulation—I turn blue—"

"Still, my dear, for Jean Carabon," said Bonheur, "perhaps . . ."

"Perhaps what?" his wife snapped. "Perhaps nothing! No, I mean to say, a woman can endure so much and no more! *Perhaps!* Hold your tongue, Bonheur. How can a lady be expected to hold her head high even in such a hole as

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Maupart, with nothing to wear and Jean Carabon singing? I take it, Mam'selle Morlaine, that one is to be presented to the great Carabon?"

"Certainly," I said.

She replied with a vulgarism which, freely translated, means, *Not in these trousers!*

"But the wood?" I said. "You wouldn't have Carabon sing hoarse?"

She said, "I don't care if he stands on his head. *I'm* not going to be pitied and humiliated. I won't go to see or hear him, dressed as I am, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!" She added, "And I'll never forgive you for this, Bonheur, as long as I live!"

Appealing to me, Bonheur said, "I am to blame for everything. But it is Louise Kenefec's fault, not mine. Mam'selle Kenefec agreed to make her a suit for which I was to pay in firewood and cheese. The suit was made. Then the cheeseman's wife, Emma Hauser, got wind of it and bid over my head with a gold twenty-mark piece—"

"—German gold," said Mme. Bonheur.

I said, "Kenefec can make another suit."

"What, by Christmas? And of English wool?" Mme. Bonheur cried.

"I'll get you the suit if you give me a cord of wood," I said. "And some honey, mind."

"Willingly!" said Bonheur.

His wife followed me a little way to ask, in a confidential whisper, "Is it true what they say . . . you know . . . about Red Cross nurses and soldiers?"

But I was marching up the road, for I had a long way to go, and it was necessary to move briskly because the marshy cold bites deep. Time was running away, and Hauser the cheeseman lived in a house eight miles distant.

I was very tired. The weight of years was on me, young as I was; and snow was falling. I began to wander in my thoughts, as one does on a lonely road in the dead of winter, and I was growing sleepy and happy—which is dangerous. So I halted at a pitiful little inn and got a glass of something improperly labelled *Brandy*.

The landlord was a melancholy little man. "Mam'selle Morlaine!" he said, "welcome home. Tell me, is it true what they say about—?"

"No, whatever it is. Whatever it is, no, it isn't. Do you have any firewood? Do you have any fresh eggs?"

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He laughed at this. "Lagrue the witch has eggs," he said, "and Bonheur the black-market man has wood. I have nothing but a broken cart and a dying mule."

"The mule can't really be dying, or you'd have eaten him by now," I said. "What's the matter with the cart?"

"Linchpin," said he.

"Is the blacksmith dead?" I asked.

"No. But he might just as well be, as far as I'm concerned. We're on bad terms."

"Short measure?" I said, summing up my man.

"That's *his* story, the liar."

"If I get you a new linchpin, what'll you pay me?"

"As much paper money as you like, Mam'selle Morlaine. Or free hire of the mule and cart."

"Wait a bit," I said, and walked over to the blacksmith's shop, and said to the big old man there, "How goes it, Lepelletier?"

"Mam'selle Morlaine! What can I do for you?"

I told him, "I want a linchpin for the innkeeper's cart."

"Oh," said Lepelletier, "oh, him."

"No, oh me," I said. "Can't you see I'm tired out?"

He said, "For a Morlaine I'd not only go through fire and water—I'd even let bygones be bygones. There, don't cry—" I didn't know I was crying—"get us a bit of wood to make a fire, and I'll make you a linchpin in ten minutes, my dear."

"Wood," I said, dully, "wood. What wood?"

"You may well ask," the blacksmith said. "I've got none." Then he thought. "You're taking that short-measurer Pichegru's mule and cart?" He roared with laughter. "Short measure for short measure! Wait while I show you."

He walked to the inn, this joyous old giant, and said to the innkeeper, "For the young lady's sake, Pichegru, I'm going to make you a linchpin. So let's have a bit of timber for a little fire."

"I haven't any," the innkeeper said, "Have a little glass of *eau-de-vie*, Lepelletier."

"Where there are carts there is timber," the blacksmith said. Thereupon, with one mighty wrench he tore off the tail-flap of the little cart and, ignoring the other man's yells of rage, carried it away to the forge, and chopped it up, and had a bright little fire going in five minutes. His wife worked the bellows while he went at a bit of iron with hammer and tongs.

As the pin took shape, he said to me, "If you are to drive that miserable mule of Pichegru's any distance, you'll want

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some hay to keep him going. Now old man Gievaerts up the road has hay and wants nails to mend his roof. I don't want hay, but I've made some nails. Like to buy?"

"I have money—"

"Who hasn't? Now if you could find a shawl or something for my old woman . . ."

"I have a spare shawl at home, I think."

"Bring it over if you like next time you're passing."

So he finished the pin and mended the cart. The old mule was a curiosity, indeed; he couldn't go far without food, that was certain.

"Better let me have those nails," I told Lepelletier.

"When you bring the shawl," said he.

I was wearing a large warm scarf around my neck. Taking it off, I asked if this would do. The blacksmith nodded and took it, giving me in exchange about two pounds of long, square-headed nails. "They are very *good* nails," he said, with a guilty look.

"That is a very good scarf," I said. "Don't apologise. The war has made beggars or tradesmen of us all. Wear it in good health, Madame Lepelletier."

Then I was on my way, riding, after a fashion, and letting the poor mule watch the paths for the two of us. At Gievaerts' ruined farm I exchanged the nails for a few handfuls of hay.

The old man said, "In peace time, wherever you go there is a board bristling with nails. Comes war, and all the nails disappear. I have seen this happen more than once, Mam'selle Morlaine. By the by; is it true what they say about Red Cross nurses . . . you know?"

"Give me a load of firewood and I'll tell you."

"I haven't got it. After Christmas, yes. Now, no. Try Bonheur, the fat pig—he has all kinds of stuff hoarded. I'm cleaned out. Here, I'll give the wretched beast some more hay." He did so. "Well, is it?"

"The answer is, No. And now I have told you," I said, riding away.

I went first to the dressmaker, Mam'selle Kenefec. She was a prim little thing in steel-rimmed spectacles.

"A nurse!" she said, clutching herself by the shoulders, "Mam'selle Morlaine a *nurse*! The things they say . . . but they can't be true . . . Oh dear!" She gave me a cup of some kind of herbal tea.

I took it gratefully; I was frozen and it was hot. Drinking

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it, I led the conversation around to suits of English wool. "You make them so well that you get paid in gold, I hear," I said.

"Just because the Hausers gave me two little gold pieces which would have been ridiculous in Paris before the war, the whole countryside is chattering!" she said, indignantly.

"They say Hauser was a spy," I said.

"Just because his name is Hauser! His family came here from Alsace three generations ago. Hauser is a nice man, Mam'selle Morlaine; but between you and me and the bedpost it wasn't to please her husband that Emma Hauser dressed herself up to look like a lady. I have nothing against Emma Hauser, and far be it from me to voice an opinion; but..."

To a gossip, even dandelion tea is scandal soup. I left an hour later, having promised to let Kenefec make over some old dresses I had, and went to the Hausers' place, twelve miles away. There was no time to beat about the bush. Emma Hauser was one of those evasive types with whom one must deal suddenly and firmly.

"I don't want any herb tea," I said, "and I don't want any wine, and I don't want any nonsense. I want that suit Louise Kenefec made you. I will pay you a thousand francs for it."

"Are you crazy? Mam'selle Morlaine, I don't understand."

"I offer you a thousand francs merely to save your face. If you do not sell me that suit for a thousand francs I will do two things. Firstly: I will make a scandal about your disgraceful conduct with my fiancé, Lambert Lesage—"

"Your *what*?"

Lying calmly and ruthlessly, I repeated, "My fiancé. So that's what the boys get up to when the women go off to the wars, is it? Cheesemongers' wives, eh? We'll see about that! Secondly; I have ample proof that your husband had dealings with the Germans during the war." As if everybody in an occupied country hasn't some dealings or other with the occupiers! But the Hauser woman had a bad conscience and a weak will; she fled when nobody pursued.

"The suit doesn't fit, anyway," she said.

"Then sell it to me." I took out a roll of money.

She said nothing; only turned down the corners of her mouth at the sight of it.

"Show your patriotism," I said. "Prove your faith in our national economy. Sell."

Emma Hauser got out the suit Kenefec had made her. It

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was little enough to boast of. I gave her a thousand paper francs. "So much for that," I said. "Now unearth me one of your husband's hoarded cheeses."

And so she did.

Hence, like the old woman in the story of the pig that wouldn't jump over the stile, I went back over the dark grey countryside to the Bonheurs', and Mme. Bonheur took the suit; and her husband filled old Pichegru's cart with firewood and gave me a great jar of honey; and I went back to the poor old witch Lagrue in the Devil's Swamp, and gave her the wood.

She said, "That is more than I bargained for. My birdies and beasties will be warm again. You are good."

"The eggs, the eggs!" I cried.

Like a miser opening his wallet, looking left and right, she took three eggs out of a kind of hole in the wall, and wrapped them in a little straw, and gave them to me. Three eggs seem little enough, perhaps; but if they had been rubies I couldn't have been more delighted. I took her in my arms, repulsive as she was, and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Why," said she, rubbing her face, "nobody has ever done that to me before in all my life! Here—". She rummaged in the shadows. Something squawked, and she was back beside me, holding a very old hen by the feet.

"For you," she said.

"It's a pity you are deaf," I said, "or you would hear something beautiful in church on Christmas Eve."

She read my lips. "Deaf or dumb," she said, "for your sake the old witch comes to church on Christmas Eve. Now go home."

And so I drove the old mule back to Maupart, and as I rode through the snow I sang for joy; for I had Carabon's eggs, and good honey to boot, and a few Yule logs, and a chicken, and a cheese—all in sixteen or seventeen hours!

Carabon was hunched gloomily over our little fire when I came home, but he brightened at the sight of me. "Suck on that, my little nightingale," I said, and put a big brown egg on the table.

He stared at it like a crystal-gazer concentrating on a glass ball. Then he started back, livid, and croaked, "Treachery! Back, all of you! It's a bomb!" God knows what horrors he had been thinking of. Startled, I let the chicken go. She ran clucking about the room. Carabon instinctively tried to

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shield me with his body. "Down, down on your face!" he cried. "It's a booby-trap—it's ticking!"

The egg *was* ticking. Even as we watched, petrified with different kinds of horror, the egg broke. A small, bedraggled head emerged. Then, with a convulsive wriggle, an entire chick, very much alive.

It ran instinctively to the old hen who tucked it under her wing.

Carabon looked at me. I looked at Carabon. And then we began to laugh, oh, what a laugh! It was a loosening of bonds, that laugh.

Then I stopped laughing and listened. Carabon's laughter was not croaking, now—it rang like a peal of bells! "Oh listen to him, listen to him—his voice has come back!" I said.

Then I wept for joy.

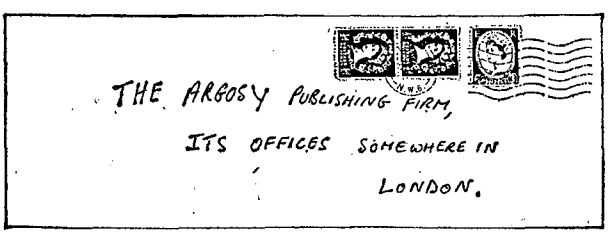
And so Jean Carabon sang his *Gloria*, and such a *Noël* as lifted up every heart; and the witch of the Devil's Swamp came to church, and enemies were reconciled, and everybody found a little something he had been hiding or hoarding, and there was such rejoicing in Maupart as had never been known before.

So, Madame . . . although it is a great sin to expect a miracle to happen, there is no harm in believing that it might, so long as one does not allow one's daily work to be interfered with. Hence, who knows? Another year, and your little Dora may catch the divine spark. Shall we keep on at her for another year, then? Excellent, so be it!

Who knows what good things the New Year brings, as the jingle goes.

Goodnight, and a joyous Christmas to you and yours.

POSTSCRIPT



It travelled hopefully . . . and arrived!

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Sunflower

ONE night, it was so cold that some polar bears in the zoo nearly got frost bite, and even the policemen couldn't stand outside the pubs at closing-time—that'll tell you how cold it was.

Not that P.C. Unfortunate ever dallied outside pubs at any time; no, he was one of the dedicated cops, you know, full of ambition, creases in his trousers, and spoke with an Oxford accent, so everybody had to ask him more than once what he was saying. He never bothered his head about petty crime, for he knew that he was merely serving a probationary period in the uniform branch.

Of course, there was an awful lot of difference between this modern production and the old style of, "Are you coming quietly, or do you want to go in an ambulance?" So when P.C. Unfortunate came upon Sunflower this bitterly cold night, he didn't order him off roughly.

Sunflower was not a lady who had fallen on evil days, nor indeed was Sunflower a female at all; this was the local name given to a beggar who professed to sell matches. How long he had stood nightly nobody knew, for even the oldest inhabitant couldn't remember, but then this isn't extraordinary for the only time when my locality is really at home is on Sundays when there's enough washing on the lines to make the decorations for a Peruvian carnival.

Now as I have said, an old-time copper would have told Sunflower to get going before he turned into a snow man; not so Unfortunate, for he'd been instructed, at all times, to keep on friendly relations with the public, even if a member of that same public was threatening to kick him in the guts.

Sunflower was all but done in—Unfortunate could see that. In spite of his college education, and checking a feeling of pity, he decided that if he ran him in, the old chap would get at least some warm food, and a nice clean cell to sleep in. So taking him by the arm he said, "Come along please."

They hadn't got far when they met a C.I.D. man who asked

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in the Snow

BY WILLIAM STEWART

Unfortunate when he had left the force and become a dustman, but Unfortunate ignored the remark, and said he was taking Sunflower to the jug to save him perishing with cold.

The C.I.D. man laughed nastily. "Perish," he said, "he won't perish in this weather, he'll just keep. You wait till he thaws a bit, then you'll see," and with this remark he made his exit from the picture and into the picture palace.

Unfortunate moved on with his charge, helping him up the station steps and into the charge room where the sergeant was sitting at the desk. Hearing the approach of the intruders he put away his football coupon, opened the charge book and looked up. Then his face went funny colours, he swallowed hard and said, "Me Gord, what have you brought in?"

Unfortunate smiled, the same as he had been taught to do at police college and, clearing his throat, which he hadn't been taught to do, replied, "Thought we could book him for the night stir, so that he can have some warm food, and a cell to sleep in. I was afraid if I had left him where I found him he would have died of exposure."

"Him," cried the sergeant as if he had been asked to charge the commissioner for taking bets off kids, "Him, why just look at him. That's Sunflower. Don't you know?"

Unfortunate, who had been thinking to himself that the drains wanted seeing to, took a good look at Sunflower, and what he saw under the brilliant light of the charge room made him step back, and several coppers who had come in to report didn't come in very far, for the heat of the room had begun to thaw Sunflower.

The sergeant slipped off his chair and, going to the windows, opened them wide, muttering something about a preference for dying of pneumonia rather than of suffocation and, returning to his desk, he slapped the charge book shut, and told the world that the Home Secretary himself couldn't make him book Sunflower.

Unfortunate shuffled his feet and strove to remember if he'd

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ever learned anything about dealing with the insubordination of superiors, but he couldn't, so he asked weakly, "Well, what shall I do with him?"

"Owtherell do I know?" said the irate sergeant. "He's your responsibility. You brought him in—you take him out. I'll tell you one thing though, I ain't going to have him shoved in one of our nice clean cells. If I did, what would our regular customers say?"

Unfortunate didn't know so he couldn't reply, and looked wistfully at Sunflower, who had become tired of standing up, and was now sitting down on the floor. Unfortunate looked hopelessly at Sunflower, then at the coppers who hadn't come farther than the door and, trying to assume an off-hand manner, asked, "Would any of you like to take him back?"

They wouldn't, definitely.

At this moment the Divisional Police Surgeon walked in, or rather he began to walk in, for he stopped abruptly, sniffed and said briskly, "I say, there's a horrid smell in this room."

The sergeant silently pointed to Sunflower.

The D.P.S. looked at Sunflower, without going any closer and said crisply, "That object's a menace to public health, he needs fumigating—often. One of your men must take him to the cleansing station—at once."

The sergeant instantly began to grin, "Hear what the doctor says?" he asked Unfortunate. "That's an order; shove Sunflower on the meat barrow and get him spruced up."

Unfortunate looked pleadingly at Sunflower, who got up and said he would help himself on to the hand ambulance, only someone would have to give him a blanket, because the sergeant's air had given him the shivers.

By the time Unfortunate had got his charge on to the wheeling ambulance the whole station was watching the act and offering all sorts of advice, but he ignored the cracks of his brother officers, and wheeled his load out into the street.

It was a decent step from the station to the hospital and by the time he got there he had acquired a following of all the kids from the neighbourhood who were not in Borstal or at home with measles.

When the gatekeeper saw the concourse coming he got into a state of great excitement, for he thought a new wing was being opened, and that nobody had told him a word about it. When he realised what was up, he banged the gate rudely in the face of the juvenile host which tried to climb the railings, at the same time expressing its opinion of the gate porter.

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Unfortunate waited outside the surgery and pondered on the wisdom of individuals who interfere with the business of the National Assistance Board, and then he looked round. The place was all shiny and clean, with nice-looking doctors and nicer-looking nurses flitting to and fro, and he thought that the trade of the old man with the scythe must be suffering from a depression, for how the hell could he do business at all these days when you think of what he's up against, what with hospitals, clinics, general practitioners, specialists, and the public health services.

Unfortunate's humanitarian musings were interrupted by the appearance of the porter who was looking quite peeved. "Here," he said, "what's the idea of bringing that old stinker here?"

Unfortunate replied apologetically, "Well, you wheeled him away so quickly that you didn't give me time to explain."

"I thought it was an accident, but it's a disaster."

"He only wants fumigating."

"Fumigating! Fumigating! Uh! Cremating, you mean!"

"Don't you clean people here?"

"Course we don't, this is a hospital, not a dust destructor."

"Where can I take him then?"

"Cleansing station round the corner."

At the cleansing station, Unfortunate decided he'd had enough of being humble and he was going to do the ruthless stuff. So he bashed on the gate of the cleansing station. "Come on, hurry up," he shouted to the porter who was staring through a little trap.

"What for?" asked the porter.

"Cleaning job," replied Unfortunate, briskly.

"What! All that lot?" yelled the porter for the mob was so great he couldn't see Sunflower.

"Don't be silly," growled Unfortunate, shoving some kids away who were pulling Sunflower's whiskers.

The porter looked at Sunflower and said brusquely, "Station's closed till nine tomorrow morning—bring him then, if he'll keep till that time."

"But can't you mind him till then?" Unfortunate was pleading now.

"Ain't got a refrigerator big enough," the porter replied.

Unfortunate swallowed hard as the porter slammed the trap shut.

He returned by back turnings until he came to a doss-house where he took Sunflower, and fixed him up for the night, and

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gave him a couple of bob. Sunflower gave no word of thanks, and with mixed feelings Unfortunate took the ambulance back to the station and signed off.

He was thinking hard as he pulled out his door key when all of a sudden he heard a voice and, turning round, he saw Sunflower. Unfortunate was feeling a bit queer.

"Yes?" he asked in a far-away voice.

"Thank you," said Sunflower simply.

"Eh?"

"Thank you."

"I don't get you." Unfortunate tried to frame some remark about duty and all the rest of it, but he was feeling giddy and one moment Sunflower was as tall as a lamp-post, and the next he was as small as a dog.

Unfortunate didn't get up for a month, because even trained police officers can't walk about with pneumonia. But he got better and one evening he was sitting by the fire reading the paper when he nearly had a relapse. Tucked away between a pools coupon and an advertisement for some insurance company, he read:

OUTCAST'S LEGATEE LOSES FORTUNE.

Yesterday afternoon an outcast known as Sunflower asked to be admitted to Lambeth Casual Ward. On entering he demanded a bath and while he was bathing, an attendant took his clothes to be fumigated. Upon examining these clothes however, the attendant decided to call the master's attention to their condition and this official instructed the attendant to put the clothes in a furnace to destroy them and then issue a fresh suit of clothes to the outcast. When these clothes were taken to the bathroom the outcast was discovered writing on a piece of paper, but no sooner was he informed that his old clothes had been destroyed than he fell back into the bath, dead. At first it was thought the shock of a bath had been too great, but later the outcast's seizure was explained when the paper on which he had been writing was examined. He had written: This is a deed of gift written by William Penfold, generally known as Sunflower. I possess £1,945 in bank notes all of which in the event of my sudden death I wish to be given to Police Constable Henry Unfortunate. All this money is sewn in the lining of my old coat.

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ISLAND TRIO

Three unforgettable tales by

GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

A CALENDAR OF LOVE

Scottish poet George Mackay Brown is new to the pages of Argosy. In his stories Brown evokes the "small green world" of Orkney, where the past and the present overlap . . . "Walk a mile or two and you will see, mixed up with the modern houses of concrete and wood, the old farmhouses sunk in time." Against Orkney's strange and wonderful landscape move figures, not unlike those who live beyond it, whose laughter and tears the author describes with brevity and a touch of poetry. In the following pages you will find three tales . . . a modern love story, a comic legend, and a haunting glimpse of days gone by . . . each different in mood, and chosen by Argosy to reveal this author's extraordinary skill, range, and power.

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ISLAND TRIO: 1

In the title story of his series poet George Mackay Brown describes the moving love of two men for the same woman

JANUARY . . . The fisherman Peter lived in a tarred hut above the rocks with his boat, his creels, his Bible.

Jean Scarth lived with her father (men called him Snipe) in the pub at the end of the village. Snipe lay in bed now all the time. The doctor said he would never see another New Year.

Thorfinn Vik the crofter lived in a new wooden house at the edge of the moor. His father and mother were dead now. His married sister lived in Canada.

Jean opened the pub at six o'clock. Peter was standing outside with three haddocks in his hand. He didn't come in; he gave Jean the fish and walked off into the darkness. He had his black suit on, the one he wore to the gospel meetings.

Thorfinn came at half past six. His face was gaunt and grey after the New Year drinking. He asked for beer and stood over the counter drinking it. Other men from the hill came in. Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland came in and began to play draughts. Three tinkers came in.

Jean said to Thorfinn, "Peter from the shore was here tonight. He's a good man, that."

"Give me a whisky," said Thorfinn. "I must keep my strength up for the ploughing."

"He had three fish but he never uttered a word," said Jean.

The men from the hill went out, then the tinkers. Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland sat over the draughtboard.

Thorfinn said, "The croft's still empty, up by."

Jean said, "I have a pub to work and a sick man to nurse. I can't come."

"I love thee well," said Thorfinn.

"And I think well of you," said Jean. "But I think little of your drinking and carry-on."

Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland began to grumble at each

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other over the draughtboard. Jean said, "It's past nine. Drink up and go."

Thorfinn finished his whisky and went out. After a time Jean followed him to the door. The black footprints went off into the snow-brimmed village.

From the door of the Mission Hall opposite, Peter stood watching her. The prayer meeting was over. His black Bible was in his hand.

FEBRUARY

After the gale in the second week of February there was much sea for days. Peter sat over his stove with the evangelical magazines. The ten lost tribes of Israel were not lost at all! They were here, in the islands of Britain, and Peter was one of them, Peter was an Israelite! He read on and on.

The van cost Thorfinn fifty pounds second-hand. Now he could go to dances in the farthest parishes and see new women. He had not passed the driving test, he had neither licence nor insurance, but he took the risk, driving at night and with no L-plates.

The old man, who had been so patient and carefree since he took to his bed, now began to summon Jean a hundred times a day. She would have to leave her beer-tap running and go up to him. He had become like a child. He wept and prayed in the darkness . . . "Don't bury me beside Mary Ann," said Snipe, "nor yet beside my father and mother. There must be a new grave, and I want a granite stone with an anchor on it."

Thorfinn was in the bar. "A sheep was run over, up for Birsay the way, last night. It was me," he said. "If the police come, you must say I was here, alone in the parlour, drinking till closing time."

"I won't tell them any such thing," said Jean. "It's a lie."

"There's a well-like lass in Birsay," said Thorfinn. "I saw her last week at the dance. Sadie Flett, that's her name."

"I wish you luck of her," said Jean, "and would you drink up, for it's closing time."

The thin cry came from upstairs: "Jean . . . Jean . . ."

At midnight the old man was still not sleeping. He was remembering ships and men from sixty years ago, and every memory was a torture.

"For God's sake and for God's sake go to sleep," whispered Jean against the wall, "for the strength and the patience are nearly out of me."

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There was a gentle knock at the outer door. Peter stood there in the moonlight.

"I saw the light in your father's room," he said.

"He's far from well," said Jean. "The old bad things are troubling him."

"I'll sit with him till the morning," said Peter.

The night passed.

In the morning Jean found them as she had left them at midnight, Peter awake in the chair and Snipe in bed, but sleeping now as quiet as a stone.

"A morning for haddocks," said Peter. "I'll sleep in the afternoon. I'll watch again tonight . . . And as for thee," he went on, "thu must get out in the fresh air. Thu're as pale as a candle."

MARCH

"I love thee," said Thorfinn, "I love thee well."

"I love thee too," said Jean.

Through the van window was the island of Gairsay, and birds, and a flowing sea. It was a Sunday evening; the police were presumably all at home.

The last of winter, a hard grey lump of snow, blocked the ditch. Silently, imperceptibly, the little rill of ditch-water unwove the stubborn snow, carried it off, a cold shining music, down to the loch and the swans.

For a long time they did not speak.

"Throw everything . . . all thy sins . . . thy weaknesses . . . in the arms . . . of the eternal . . . the everlasting . . ." said Peter earnestly and hopelessly over the shape in the bed.

"No, but listen," said Snipe. "It was in Montevideo they all got drunk and the next morning the skipper mustered the crew and eight were missing and the same morning the South American police came aboard and said they had seven of them in jail and to bail them out would cost a hundred and eight quid so the skipper—"

"Mr. Scarth," said Peter, "O man, you're *dying*. Are you not sorry before Almighty God?"

"—because he *had* to sail," said Snipe, "that very day. So he paid up, or rather the consul paid. And it was a month before Jock Slater was dragged out of the harbour. He was the eighth one but they didn't have to pay a penny for him—"

"Listen," cried Peter, "in Revelation it says—"

But soon Snipe was out on his own, in a place beyond scriptures and seaports and bad foreign hooch.

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Peter met Jean on the stair, "Thy father's dead," he said.

Later, beside the fire, he said, "Bury thy father and sell this bad place. I love thee."

"You're a good man, Peter," said Jean.

She went once more to look at the dead face. She came back crying. "O Thorfinn," she said.

"Thorfinn!" said Peter. "Do you want that badness all over again? Your father died speaking of drink. God help him, that's the truth. Do you want to go on living that way?"

"No," said Jean, "and you're a good man."

"Do you want to go on staying in this place?" said Peter.

"No," said Jean, and kissed him gently. And again.

He took her in his hard religious arms.

In the grey of morning Peter went out and knocked at the undertaker's door and went on home. He went down on his knees among the nets and oars, and prayed.

APRIL

A stone went up in the churchyard:

In memory of
JOHN SCARTH
Inn-Keeper in this Parish
Formerly a Seaman
1880–1962

"May There Be No Moaning Of The Bar
When I Put Out To Sea"

Carved anchors, dolphins, waves, sailing ships, tumbled after each other round the edge of the white marble.

"There should have been barrels of sour beer too, and naked women," said Thorfinn.

And later he said, "Many a poor bloody drunkard's last shilling went to pay for that stone."

And to Jean he said, "It's a credit to you, the stone you put up to Snipe . . ."

"Where are you going in the van tonight?" said Jean.

"Nowhere," said Thorfinn.

"Tell me," said Jean, "so I won't need to hear it from the gossip-mongers."

"I'm going to Holm," said Thorfinn.

"To Hazel Groat," said Jean.

Thorfinn drank his whisky down and went out.

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Peter didn't come near the village now, not even for the gospel meetings. He bought his provisions from the grocery van.

"That's a fine stone they've raised for Snipe Scarth in the kirkyard," said Josiah of the Shore to Peter across a black stretch of net.

"I never saw it," said Peter.

"Tell me now," said Josiah, "would you say Snipe's in Heaven or in Hell?"

"It's not for me to say," said Peter.

"Just so," said Josiah. "Poor man . . . And he has a daughter."

"He has," said Peter.

"The business is being carried on," said Josiah. "She has a sharp tongue in her head, that one. She'll comb the head of some poor man. Ay."

"There's another tear in the net," said Peter. "What's needed here is a good woman that knows how to mend things, and to clean and to cook. The price of a good woman is above rubies."

MAY

Jean, dreaming, walked on a green hill. There were swans in the water below her, and clouds like swans in the sky above.

A man walked along the road from the sea. He was all wet from a shipwreck. "Gideon's fleece is not more glorious," Peter said (for it was Peter). He was walking not towards her but towards Thorfinn who was having difficulty in ploughing a field with the axle of a car.

Thorfinn turned and hewed at Peter with his plough-axle but it buckled on Peter's shoulder like cardboard. He touched Thorfinn with his black book. Formally, gently, Thorfinn fell across the furrow.

Jean was carrying a vase. She knelt to put it in a small grave in the corner of the field but a bird looked out of it, a blue bird with sweet frightened eyes. She gathered it in her hands. Its wings were cold. It was a bird of ice.

She was going into a church with a broken arch, where a service was going on. It was night. Her hands were cut and bleeding—inside she would find a cure. O, her hand was a thorn, a flame, such agony!

Peter in a black cloak stood at the arch. He looked at her with blank eyes.

Farther in, hidden from her, voices were singing among cold, bright images.

Jean woke with a cry in the dawn . . .

Peter was walking down the beach, loaded with creels, towards

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his dinghy. Josiah walked five paces behind him, loaded with creels. It was a good morning for the lobsters . . .

All that month Thorfinn's van had been probing in another direction, out towards Orphir. The girl there was called Myra Stanger. After the dance he had made her drunk with gin. She sat in the van beside him now, singing in an ugly slack way. Thorfinn drove fast, to be home before the police were stirring. "I love thee," he said to Myra.

At Glengoes he stopped the van. He climbed through a fence and came back later with a dead dangling chicken. He threw it in the back of the van. Myra was asleep. He drank some gin. Then he started the engine again and drove on into the growing light.

JUNE

Thorfinn said to Jean, "Ann Johnston. And Sadie Flett. And Hazel Groat. And Myra Stanger. And Agnes Sinclair. But thee I love."

Jean said to Peter, "So now I see it was only to save the soul of a bad old man you came visiting here."

Peter said to Thorfinn, "Thu're a thing of lust and drunkenness, and I have a strong inclination to drag thee like a rat through the ditch. I can't find in my soul one drop of love for thee, not one, God help me."

Thorfinn said to Peter, "I'll give thee five shillings for that skate, for not only salted does skate put a powerful thirst in the throat, but boiled it sends a man raging after women in the darkness of night, both in dreams and in reality."

Peter said to Jean, "I'm a poor man but strong in my body. I believe my election is sealed. I pray that grace will fall on thee also. I wish to see no woman but thee standing in my door every day when I haul the dinghy ashore after the fishing."

Jean said to Thorfinn, "This is what is wrong with me, this is why I have the darkness under my eyes and my mouth is full of sharp words, that I think I'm . . . O, go away . . . It's closing time!"

JULY

On the last day of the Carnival Week in Stromness, Thorfinn drove his unlicensed van past two policemen at the north end of the town and parked it in the square. In the Britannia Bar he drank whisky and beer. There were not many people in the town yet.

That day, Saturday, Peter did not go to the creels. In the afternoon he put on his white shirt and black suit. He took the Bible

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under his arm. He caught the bus to Stromness at the smithy.

Jean said to James Firth, "I'll give thee a pound to serve at the bar tonight, and thu can have a double whisky before thu opens the door and another when the last customer has gone. Will thu do that? For I must go to Stromness . . ." James Firth agreed to do that, on those terms. Jean gave him the key . . .

Thorfinn left the Britannia Bar and went to the Hamnavoe Bar. He drank whisky. Andrew of Feadale came in. Andrew drank vodka, and stood Thorfinn a glass of vodka too. "It has a queer taste, vodka," said Thorfinn, "like sweet paraffin, and the Russians must be a barbarous bloody nation to drink stuff like that" . . . Through the window they could see the parish buses coming in for the Carnival, one after the other.

Peter got off the bus and went to the house of William Simpson the butcher and evangelist. William Simpson did not believe that the British nation comprised the ten lost tribes of Israel. They argued the matter gravely over the ham and eggs, quoting texts and authorities. Afterwards they planned the order of the open-air service that was to take place at the Pierhead at seven o'clock, D.V.

Jean got off the bus and went to the doctor's surgery . . .

Thorfinn drank another glass of vodka with Andrew. Then he drank a glass of rum by himself, and then some whisky and beer. He bought a half-bottle of whisky and went back to the Britannia. There were many people in the street now. In the Britannia he met Sam of Biggings and Freddy and Jock and Archer and Tom.

Peter said to William Simpson that the New Dispensation of Grace began in the year 1917, on the day General Allenby walked into Jerusalem, as was abundantly proved by certain texts in Daniel and Revelation, namely . . . At this point, four more evangelists came in carrying Bibles.

Jean stood on one of the stone piers and watched the fishing boats riding at anchor. It was quiet here, and clean. The doctor had uttered six or seven words. It was lonely here. So the hunted animal carries her wound away to a secret water, and waits patiently for death or renewal . . .

Thorfinn drank whisky with the boys. The pub was so full now they decided to go through to the cocktail bar. The cocktail bar was full too. They stood against the wall and drank whisky. There were many girls in the cocktail bar.

Freddy took a bottle of whisky out of his coat and passed it round the boys.

Peter stood with eleven others in a ring beside the fountain.

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They sang, *Count Your Blessings, There is a Fountain, The Hallelujah Lifeboat.* Peter read out of Isaiah and Galatians. William Simpson preached. The Carnival—drunkenness, lechery, violence—raged all round that shining circle. Inside was Sion, the promise, the everlasting courts of the King.

The floats went by, one after another, bearing Stone Age men, mermaids, a surgical theatre, a shebeen, a schoolroom, Hell, a Turkish harem, a moon-ship. Then walking clowns, Hawaiian girls, Victorians, Cossacks, Red Indians, Chinamen, Martians. Jean stood in the door of the pharmacy and watched the procession cleaving the crowd, spreading behind a wide wake of cheers, shouts, ribaldry . . .

"I'll buy thee a drink. I love thee," said Thorfinn at a table where two girls he didn't know and two young men were sitting.

"No," said the girl.

Thorfinn fell across their table and slithered on to the floor in a ruin of gin and beer and broken glass.

Then he found himself outside.

He had never seen so many faces.

He fell in the street. Cars hooted all round. A great walking pelican straddled him.

"Anyone who thinks that is a fool," said William Simpson. "He is a liar and the truth is not in him."

"*I* think that," said Peter.

"Then," said William Simpson severely, "if the cap fits, you can wear it."

They were having black puddings and tea in William Simpson's parlour after the open-air meeting.

From the street below came Carnival cries, songs, laughter, from the hordes of the lost.

"You would like to dictate. You think you have the whole truth. In your pride you think you're God's chosen man in this island," said Peter.

The ten other evangelists listened in a dark silence.

"If it comes to that," said Willian Simpson with great deliberation, "I have never consorted *with publicans and sinners* . . ." He munched at his bread. Three of the evangelists looked at Peter accusingly.

Nearly everybody on the street was drunk now. Jean struggled to get to the last bus through the ebbing crowds. She was desperately tired. Vivid images glowed and faded in her mind—three fish, a nautical gravestone, a winter cradle, a bird in a vase,

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Thorfinn at the plough, Thorfinn at the dartboard, Thorfinn helpless on a mad street . . .

Round the corner, near the bus station, a jazz band began to play, and the coloured lights came on.

Thorfinn found himself at the wheel of his van. A strange girl was sitting beside him, stroking his head. How had he got here?

He kissed the girl.

He felt in his hip pocket for the whisky. It wasn't there.

"I'll drive thee home," said Thorfinn.

"Yes," said the girl. She went on combing his hair with her fingers.

Solemnly Thorfinn turned the van and drove through the crowd, out of the town.

The police sergeant was standing at the Bank gate. He looked searchingly at Thorfinn. Solemnly Thorfinn drove past him.

Peter, his Bible askew under his arm, hurriedly crossed the street in front of the van. Thorfinn blasted him with the horn.

"I love thee," said Thorfinn to the girl. "Where does thu live?"

Peter, having missed the last bus, decided to walk home.

He was finished with that crowd in Stromness. He would never go to their meetings again. Never.

He could have taken William Simpson, and broken him, so angry had he been! By God's help, he had managed to control himself.

But this was the end. He had been to his last gospel meeting in Stromness. Never again.

A green van careered past him.

As Peter walked home, the Carnival rockets rushed up the darkening sky, one after another. Out of their ruin, silent globes of light blossomed and floated, yellow and green and red, to die suddenly on the midnight . . .

Jean took the key from James Firth and gave him a pound. She locked the door and put out the light. Alone in the darkness she felt for a moment she wanted to pray, but she could think of nobody to pray for except the pelican guiser who had lifted Thorfinn out of the gutter; and maybe the burden inside her that already filled her with such weariness and shame; the pilgrim; the stranger; the lawless dancer.

AUGUST

Three among hundreds of advertisements one week in the *Orcadian*, the local newspaper:

THE TEN LOST TRIBES OF ISRAEL—*where are they*? They

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inhabit the British Isles *today*! We are THE CHOSEN PEOPLE in a world *hastening to its end*! Those who would like to know more about this *undoubted fact* are invited to a public meeting in Ingsevay Community Centre on (D.V.) 15 August, at 8 p.m.

Experienced full-time *barman* wanted for Ingsevay Inn. Wages £8 10*s*. per week. Apply Miss Jean Scarth, The Inn, Ingsevay.

FOR SALE—A green Morris van, 1945, in first class running order. Can be seen. Apply Box No. 3124.

SEPTEMBER

The oatfield of Helliar was almost cut. Thorfinn had never been so tired. Since before dawn six of them, men and girls, had been working in the field. For this one harvest day the sun had stored up all the heat and glare of a dull summer. It burst suddenly out of the early morning mist and laid an unclouded flame on the hillside. The wind and rain of the previous week had laid and tangled the corn, so that it was hard to cut. Girls and men toiled together, gathering and binding. The reaper jolted along like a huge, clogged, purposeful insect. About noon the men had taken off their shirts. Thorfinn's back, aflame with the sun, was mottled in addition with insect bites.

They ate their dinner under the south wall—chicken and bannocks and home-brewed ale.

"Where are the clouds of July and August?" said Thorfinn, taking his arm across his sweat-silvered brow. Sam cursed sun, oats, reaper, sweat, women, dogs, the Fall of Man. Ann and the other girls laughed, packing away the plates and bottles.

Thorfinn finished his ale and rose groaning into the hot blue afternoon. Freddy climbed once more into the reaper.

They moved forward, step by step. The corn fell with long hot sighs. The girls followed, gathering and binding the sheaves. The heat accelerated, the insects moved in from the heather. All afternoon the hillside was lapped by pitiless flame. But now at last the harvesters had found a perfect rhythm; faultlessly, effortlessly, they moved through the corn, stooping, rising, burdening and disburdening themselves as in some ritual of birth and death. Sun blistered, insects troubled and stung, limbs were heavy and sore, but the great shining ceremony went on through the afternoon. The bread and ale were secure for another year.

At six o'clock the field was all cut and the harvesters went home . . .

Peter was gathering limpets from the rocks at low tide, out

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beyond the Point of Ramness. Slowly he went along the beach, a tin pail in one hand and a blunt knocking-stone in the other. Slowly and surely he moved among the clusters of limpets, knocking them into his ringing bucket.

The tide was at full ebb, the beach was heaped with layer upon layer of tangle. And there, in those brown wastes, a sudden bright swathe!

He went nearer, keeping his balance with difficulty in the slippery weed.

It was long blonde hair.

Peter pulled back the mantling seaweed. A cold dead face looked up at him.

He stood among the seaweed, shocked. Who could it be? There was that paragraph in the *Orcadian* a fortnight ago about the Hoy woman who was missing. But could the sea have carried her over all this way, from Hoy? She was young.

Peter bent down and lifted her in his arms. Water slopped out of her clothes. Staggering, he carried her up the beach and laid her on a flat sloping rock. The sea streamed from her over the hot stone.

It was a long way from the tents in the deserts of Sinai to this salt pool. It was a long way from the terrible mercy of Jehovah to the wearing doubts and despairs of a corrupt perverse Godless generation.

He walked the mile back to the village. At the shop he got three pennies for a threepenny bit. He phoned the police at Kirkwall.

The body lay on the rock, guarded by a gull and a pail of limpets . . .

Up among the hills, seven miles from Ingsevay, the tinkers were sleeping in their tent.

"Would you stop muttering to yourself," said old Ezra to the thin huddle beside him, "and go to sleep."

"I'm praying," said Williamina, "and don't say another word till I'm done."

"What are you praying for when the hill's full of rabbits?" said Ezra.

"I'm praying for that girl Jean in Ingsevay. She's going to have a bairn. She's like a ripe apple. She's the shape of an egg."

"Hurry up then," said Ezra, "for it's a hot night, and I want to sleep."

Williamina asked the Virgin and St. Magnus and all the other bright saints of Heaven to pray for Jean who had retreated into the darkness, out of folks' sight, with her precious shameful

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burden; Jean, who had always been good to the tinkers and given them beer and bread whenever they were passing through in the old poor destitute days before National Assistance.

She touched her crucifix among the straw and prayed for Jean.

"Who is the father of this child?" said Ezra in a sleepy voice.

"A man," said Williamina.

She crossed herself, finishing her prayer. Then she slept.

OCTOBER

Peter hesitated, bit his lip, looked up and down the road and between the houses, then walked straight into the pub and up to the bar.

Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland looked at him as if he were a ghost. So the elders might look at them some Sabbath morning, if ever they stepped doucely into the kirk.

"I want to speak to Miss Scarth," said Peter to James Firth, who had been permanent barman now for two months.

"Jean's not seeing anybody," said James Firth.

"Tell her *I'm* here," said Peter.

"It wouldn't matter a damn if I told her the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Dalai Lama was here, she wouldn't see them," said James Firth.

"Give me a piece of paper," said Peter, "I'll write her a note."

> Jean—from study of scripture and multiplying signs I make it that this world is near an end. Woe then unto them that have turned aside. It were better for them, etc. I desire to save thee.
>
> This thy house Rimmon is a house marked for quick destruction.
>
> Come to where I live beside the sea and thou shalt be looked after, both thee and thy unborn child. Tarry here and thou shalt taste of the bitterness of loss. I am thy servant, Peter.

Having folded it and handed it to James Firth for delivery, Peter went out again past those two gaping thirsts, Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland.

He hadn't been gone five minutes when Thorfinn came in.

"Give me a pint," said Thorfinn, "and tell me, am I in the horrors with drink, or did that holy fisherman, the damnation-monger, walk out of this place two minutes ago?"

"He did," said Seatter and Eric together.

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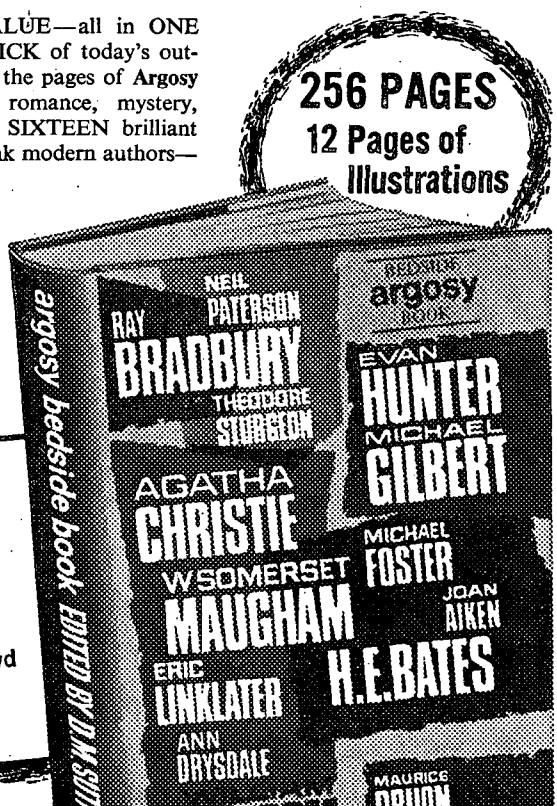

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"It *must* be near the end of the world then," said Thorfinn. To James Firth he said, "I want to see Jean."

James Firth said, "She isn't seeing anybody."

"Tell her it's me," said Thorfinn.

"It wouldn't matter," said James Firth, "if you was Robbie Burns, Casanova and Don Juan all in one."

"Let's see a piece of paper then," said Thorfinn.

He wrote:

> My dear Jean—I've said to a hundred lasses, one time or another, "I love thee." All lies. But to thee I say, "I love thee" and "I love thee" and "I love thee." When will I see you? Thorfinn.

Upstairs Jean read the two letters and put them both on the fire. She tried to retrieve Thorfinn's but the flame beat her. Flake by black flake, they drifted up the chimney.

NOVEMBER

The first snowflake of winter.

At five past five, Josiah summoned up courage to say, "I doubt it, Peter, thu've made a miscalculation."

In Peter's hut were gathered Josiah, Josiah's wife Bella, Josiah's cousin Hedda from the quarry, and Josiah's children Aaron and Rebecca. Aaron and Rebecca had been crying, their faces were stained with tears, but now they were quiet again, as if they realised that a great crisis was safely past.

Josiah began again, "I doubt, Peter—"

"Yes," said Peter sadly, "you can all go home now."

It was to have been the end of the world. Peter had calculated it as being due to take place at four ten that afternoon, and so he had invited Josiah and his dependants, as well as several others who had not come, to assemble in his hut, to the end that all true believers in the parish might be together when the terrible and glorious event took place. But nothing had happened.

"It won't be today," said Peter, and opened the door. "I must have made a miscalculation."

The two children ran shouting into the darkness.

Then the heavens did give a sign. As Peter stood in the lighted doorway, the sky opened and released the first snowflake of winter . . .

Thorfinn sold the van at last to a Kirkwall docker, and undertook to deliver it on Thursday afternoon at Kirkwall pier. Unlicensed, uninsured, untested, Thorfinn climbed into the green

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van for the last time. He had partially covered the number plates with a careless drapery of sacking. The darkness was coming down.

At Kiln Corner, on the edge of Kirkwall, a policeman flashed his torch at Thorfinn, signalling him to stop. Thorfinn pressed his foot on the accelerator. The van rushed forward. Sweating, Thorfinn turned it into Bridge Street, and eased it into the dark corner of the car park. He got out quickly, whipped the sacking from the number plates, and walked up Bridge Street and along Albert Street. There, opposite the Big Tree, the policeman was, and one of his colleagues with him. They were waiting for a green van to pass. Thorfinn endured their scrutiny and walked on. They hadn't recognised him.

He turned down Castle Street, along Junction Road, and walked down the long pier. There, loading barrels of whisky with a score of other dockers, was his man. Thorfinn told him where the van was parked, then walked back up the pier. The pubs were just opening. He drank three glasses of rum, and went home on the bus at half past six.

Agnes Sinclair was on the bus. She signalled to him, made room for him on her seat. He sat by himself in the front. At the Dykes he got off the bus. He walked up the long miry road to Helliar. Beyond the peat stack the police van was parked. When they saw Thorfinn coming the two policemen climbed out of their black van and the Kirkwall docker followed them.

The first policeman called to Thorfinn to stop.

Thorfinn stopped. His fists swelled in the pockets of his raincoat. Would he rush them now, or take them one by one?

The first snowflake of winter trembled in the air above the henhouse. It eddied and shimmered in the wind. Then it fell lightly and sweetly on to Thorfinn's hot clenched fist, a kiss of peace.

Grinning, he walked forward to meet the interrogators . . .

Jean sat alone at the top window of the Ingsevay Inn. Through the window, the hill darkened. The sky was grey.

For four months she had lived in this room. She had neither shown herself outside nor in the bar below. She was dedicated to loneliness. She sewed in a chair beside the window. She waited.

The days darkened round her.

In her womb the slow shameful inexorable dance went on. But now the shame had died. She was simply indifferent. Indifference lay on her like a heavy stone.

Down below, an argument broke out. It flared, then faded into

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muttered imprecations and reproaches. Jean recognised the voices of Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland. James Firth was not good at controlling such outbursts. Let them carry on. She didn't really care now.

The hill darkened.

Suddenly she saw the first snowflake. It fluttered over the rose bush in the garden. It climbed the air, circled, meandered down the wind. Then surely, gently, chastely, it drifted on to the window and clung there, shimmering.

This was beautiful!

Startled, she looked at the frail grey thing on the windowpane. The dead stone lifted inside her.

And then suddenly everything was in its place. The tinkers would move for ever through the hills. Men would plough their fields. Men would bait their lines. Comedy had its place in the dance too; the drinking, the quarrelling, the expulsion, the return in the morning.

And forever the world would be full of youth and beauty, birth and death, labour and suffering.

The child moved inside her in a wind of light . . .

The snowflake lived on her window for five seconds, then died into a glistening drop of water. The hill darkened. A hundred snowflakes fell, a thousand, the wind crammed them against the pane. The hill was lost.

Down in the bar the voices rose again, Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland.

Jean went quickly downstairs and opened the door into the bar.

They were arguing across a draughtboard. Eric screeched, Seatter growled, their flaming faces set close together.

"Out," said Jean quietly, and pointed to the door.

They hastened to be gone, like men caught with their trousers down. They almost fell over each other in the door. They were gone.

The awkward silence lasted only for a second.

"Jean, lass," said Sam of Biggings, "we haven't seen thee this long while, and we've missed thee, and we're glad to see thee again."

"And I'm glad to see thee, Sam," said Jean. "And thee, Andrew. And thee, Freddy. And thee, Jock. And Ezra and Williamina from the hill . . . James," she said to the barman, "whisky on the house for all here, to warm us for the winter."

Out on the road, Seatter of Stark was saying to Eric Weyland, "That's the last drink I buy in that place."

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"The impudence, putting *us* out, her best customers!" said Eric. "And her with that great pirate cargo in her!"

"A shameless slut!" said Seatter of Stark.

The cold wind blew them over the hill helter-skelter.

It was snowing faster now.

DECEMBER

"Turn her," said Peter. Josiah leant on the tiller. A wave broke against the *Bethel*, involved them in its ruin, lurched on.

With the blizzard they could see nothing. They might be out in the Sound, they might be under the Black Crag, they might be among the Kirk Rocks.

The engine coughed and snored.

With the blizzard, wind and sea had risen. They were on a broken perilous stair, climbing and falling blindly.

"Watch this wave," said Peter. The wave licked at them coldly, shrugged on.

"Is it an inshore wave, or a wave of the Sound?" said Peter.

"It's more inshore," said Josiah. "God preserve us."

"Turn her," said Peter. Josiah leant on the tiller. The *Bethel* slipped into a trough between green waves, shuddering.

"Steady," said Peter. The second wave rolled over them, almost rolled them over. The boat took much water.

They could see nothing. Out of a circular wall of blackness the snow came at them, from all directions. Under the wild-woven shroud at the bottom of the boat there were shapes of fish. The oilskins of the men were black behind, white in front.

The engine coughed. Another salt spasm set the *Bethel* shuddering from stem to stern.

"Turn her," said Peter.

Josiah leant on the rudder. "I never wanted to come out this morning," he said. "It was foolishness."

Peter, bent over the engine, said nothing.

"Now we're in God's hands," said Josiah.

"What better hands could we be in?" said Peter.

A wave came at them. The *Bethel* rose against it. They met, coughing and snarling, tore each other, and passed on.

Peter's hands were blue, heavy, lifeless as he bent over the engine, probing. He didn't like the sound it was making. Maybe they would have to hoist the sail.

Snow came at them from all directions.

Josiah screamed, "O God, a rock!"

The black rock rose twenty yards away. The sea was breaking white on it. It was Braga.

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"Thank God," said Peter. Now he knew exactly where they were. "Turn her," he said.

Josiah leant on the rudder. His face was a mask of snow. A new wave threw them forward . . .

The village was isolated. Through four hushed days and nights the snow had fallen, and spread a vast monotony. On the fifth day the wind got up. It worked on the blank parish and everywhere altered its contours. It laid white drifts across the roads into Ingsevay, it dragged down the telegraph wires, it buried folds and fences and fishing-boats in the noust.

And still the snow fell.

Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland went into the pub at noon. It was empty. They stamped their feet and beat on the counter with their knuckles. Nobody answered. They knew that James Firth would not be there, the roads were blocked. But where was Jean? The door was open. The fire was lit. They set out the draughts on the window seat and waited.

Ezra and Williamina came in. Their faces shone for a minute in the open door, like people transfigured.

"Where's Jean?" said Williamina.

The draught-players shook their heads.

The tinkers stood at the fire, stamping their feet.

"I'll go and draw two pints," said Ezra. "We can pay when she comes in."

"Maybe she's at the well," said Eric Weyland.

Williamina said, when their glasses were half empty, "Maybe her time's come."

"Ah," said Ezra, "drink up. We'll have two more pints while we're waiting."

Seatter of Stark heard the noise first, it came from upstairs, a thin flutter and a cry, like a winged duck in a marsh. He said nothing, but his eyes bulged.

The noise came again, and this time they all heard it.

"It's Jean," said Williamina.

Seatter of Stark and Eric Weyland knocked over the draught-board in their hurry to be gone. They left the door swinging on its hinges. A flurry of snow wet the blue stone floor of the pub.

"We better get the doctor," said Ezra, though he knew the telephone lines were down and the road was blocked.

"I've taken a hundred bairns into the world," said Williamina. She drank off her beer and went upstairs.

Ezra shut the door and put the iron bar across it. He put three lumps of coal on the fire. Then he went behind the bar and lowered a singing rope from the brandy bottle into a glass.

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Thorfinn woke late to find Helliar half-buried in snow. His throat was dry after the whisky last night with Sam of Biggings. He put on his coat and set off towards the village for beer. Beyond Voar, the drifts were high. The road wandered away into a white blank.

He tried to get round by the field above, and came back half an hour later, sodden and red in the face.

He knocked on the window of Voar and asked for a shovel to clear a way through.

"The snow's too deep," said Bella of Voar.

He dug for an hour into the towering whiteness and blankness. It was impossible.

The four spinsters of Voar called him in to drink tea.

"Ah," said Maggie, "and how much did they fine you in the Sheriff Court?"

"Fifty pounds," said Thorfinn, "with the option of three months' imprisonment. And I'm disqualified from driving for two years. To obstructing the police in the lawful exercise of their duty, charge not proven."

They looked at him in reprobation and admiration, and put more scones and tea in front of him.

The women of Voar were plain and stout. None of them was ever married.

Their names were Bella, Maggie, Betsy and Isa. They spoke in the old-fashioned way.

Thorfinn got to his feet. "I must get through to the village," he said.

"For drink?" said Isa disapprovingly.

"For drink," said Thorfinn. "Give me the shovel. I'll try once more."

The snow had stopped now. He took the spade and went out again. Bella went to the henhouse. Maggie went to the byre. Betsy sat at the spinning wheel. Isa moved about the kitchen, between the fire, the cupboard, the table, seeing to the dinner.

The four women of Voar assembled for their soup at two o'clock. Through the window they could see a small black figure in the snow, like a wingless, legless fly on a vast tablecloth. He would never, never get through. The spade was striking at the drift in a slow dull mechanical rhythm. Thorfinn was beaten. But he went on digging.

"No man digs like that for drink," said Maggie.

"It's for the woman," said Betsy.

"Yes," said Isa, "it's for Jean."

"They say her time's near," said Betsy, "and the father is said

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to be that gospel fisherman Peter, but be that as it may, it's a good job old Snipe's lying in the kirkyard away from it all."

Thorfinn was still digging. They watched him through the window with pity and amusement.

"The phone," said Bella.

Betsy said, "The line's down."

"We can try," said Isa.

Maggie dialled the Ingsevay Inn and got through at once. A drunken tinker voice spoke from the other end. Maggie couldn't make out what he was saying. Sometimes he sang. He mentioned trout and bagpipes. Finally he said, "I'm drunk with brandy."

Maggie said severely, "Please tell us how Jean is—Miss Scarth."

"There's a new landlord at the Inn since an hour ago," said the black reeling old voice, "and may he grow up to be a kinder landlord than old Snipe his grandfather . . . him that's lying out there in the kirkyard under the falling snow . . . and never once in his life gave a poor tinker as much as a thimbleful . . ." The voice died away into a long musical sigh, "I'm drunk . . . with the brandy."

Outside, Thorfinn was sitting on the edge of the drift, with the spade across his knees and his head in his hands. He was beaten. He would never get through.

They sent out Betsy to tell him the news. Bella raked the fire. Maggie took from the cupboard a full bottle of whisky and five glasses.

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George Mackay Brown, born in Stromness, Orkney, in 1921, was the son of a tailor who became a postman. His mother, from the Highlands, originally spoke Gaelic. After leaving school, he suffered from tuberculosis. His health has been troublesome ever since. He was first encouraged to write poetry at Newbattle Abbey College. Two collections of his verse have appeared: *Loaves and Fishes* and *The Year of the Whale*. The author writes of himself: "He becomes quickly bored with printed works, and so doesn't read very much. He prefers short poems, such as those that the Greek and Chinese poets made so supremely well. He is not angry with anyone or anything, except very occasionally with politicians, business magnates, highbrow literary critics, and some people who affect the arts. He likes most of all to drink beer with his friends in the evening."

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ISLAND TRIO: 2

Tam

THERE was once a young Orkneyman called Tam who lived with his mother in a croft among the hills. It was a poor croft, and the laird was a hard man. Many a winter morning Tam had to tramp miles to the Birsay coast to gather limpets and dulse, when there was nothing in the house to eat.

At last, one winter, things came to such a pass that Tam could endure it no longer. He decided that, as soon as spring came, he would set out for Stromness and catch a boat going to Hudson's Bay or the Davis Straits. If he stayed in the "nor'-wast" for a few years, he reasoned with the old woman, and if he worked hard, maybe he would arrive back in Orkney with a bag of money. Then he could bury her decently among her fathers in the kirk-yard and buy a new cow, and a new plough, and a new watch to wear in his waistcoat pocket on Sundays.

Lulled by these promises, the old woman consented. One morning in March, Tam tramped along the squelching road to Stromness. He carried his boots in one hand and a bundle in the other. The bundle contained two bere bannocks, a hard-boiled egg, and a Bible.

The harbour was full of masts when he arrived in the town, and the street was full of strange sailors and country lads, all bound like himself for the great white spaces five hundred miles over the horizon.

The first thing Tam did was to go to the agent. The agent eyed him, noting the great width of his shoulders and the shy steady light in his eyes. Then he put a quill pen in Tam's hand and told him to sign his name on a form. Tam managed it with a mighty furrowing of his brow.

"The ship sails in the morning," said the agent. "Where will thu sleep this night?"

"Maybe Jock, my second cousin, will tak' me in," said Tam.

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The agent patted him on the shoulder, and Tam set out to look for the house of Jock his second cousin.

Jock was a cobbler, who lived up a dark close. He was very religious, and had curious ideas of sin and justification. He was a widower and had three bright-eyed, apple-cheeked daughters, clustered in age round the sweet number twenty, like three wasps round a squashed plum. They worked well for Jock. They kept his house as clean as a bone. Every text was straight on the wall, not a cobweb adhering to it. When he went to the meeting on Sabbath mornings, Jock's trousers had an edge on them as sharp as death's sting. The names of these three girls were: Bella, Jamesina, and Margaret-Ann.

Now Jock was worldly enough to appreciate the good works his three daughters did for him. He had no intention of forfeiting one jot or tittle of the comforts with which their willing hands supplied him. So young men were discouraged from coming about the house. And Bella, Jamesina and Margaret-Ann were discouraged from going out walks at night. Sometimes Jock gave them a ringing clout on the ear to drive the point home.

So the three girls resigned themselves to spinsterhood, and went back to their household tasks. But sometimes each of them, when she was alone, fetched a profound sigh from the bottom of her diaphragm.

Then Tam arrived, asking for a night's lodging.

Jock glowered at him, but took him in, for he could scarcely refuse his own second cousin.

Bella, Jamesina and Margaret-Ann, standing well back from the threshold, eyed him with looks at once sweet and shy, like doves when a child comes among them crumbling cake.

After midnight, Tam had occasion to rise from his bed, and while he was groping his way back to it in the darkness, suddenly he found himself tangled in soft warm human arms. He had gone into the wrong room, but the enchantment of his mistake forbade any retreat. He lay where he was, while the stars marched across the skylight, a great rejoicing legion. The only thing the foolish lad could say was, "Bella . . . Bella . . . Bella."

He was awakened from his folly by a pool of light shining on him and Bella from above. It was Jamesina, with a candle in her hand. Her eyes, though loaded with sleep, were soft and appealing.

"Tam," she said, "thu must come with me now, or I'll tell me father."

Gently and firmly, Bella propelled him into Jamesina's arms, and the candle was blown out. The night was a cave of dripping

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sweetness, in which he lay drenched and exhausted, but exulting in the vigour and beauty of his manhood.

The first greyness of morning fumed across the skylight, and brought him back to the sadness of human existence; for he heard a low harsh weeping beside the window with the fern in it, and there sat the youngest sister Margaret-Ann with her face buried in her nightgown.

"For pity's sake," said Jamesina, "go now and comfort our poor peerie sister Margaret-Ann."

So it came about, that before the sun had cleared the Orphir Hills, Margaret-Ann had stopped her lamenting, and Tam went down for the third time into the deep dark waters of love, whose waves thunder forever with a wild, uncertain, joyous rhythm on the tragic shores of life.

Next morning Tam sailed away into the "nor'-wast" and was never heard tell of again.

The old woman died alone in her croft among the hills. And three bonny bairns, born within a week of each other, played on the steps of the close where Jock the shoemaker lived.

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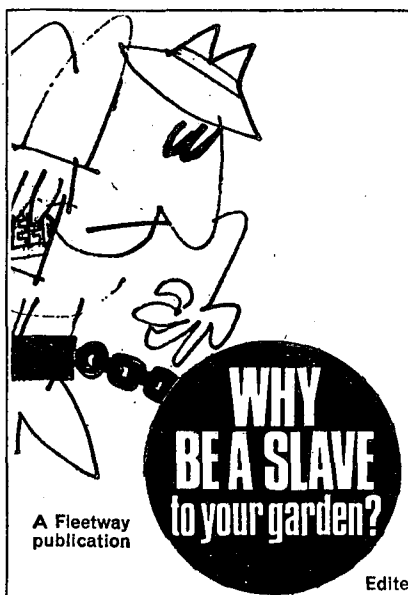

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ISLAND TRIO: 3

Net of TIME

IT was a bad day for fishing. We should not have agreed to go out with him at all. But Sander's creels had lain there in the torn firth for a week. Some of them would have been smashed over the weekend. Sander said he would give Bill and me two pounds each to help him that morning.

We left the beach as soon as it was light. Cold lumps of sea met us in the Sound. Sander said some of his creels were off Eynhallow. "What kind of a place is that to set creels?" said Bill in a low voice, so that Sander couldn't hear.

The sea was going in a spate between Rousay and Eynhallow, broken and white as if it poured over different levels. This was The Roost. The *Emily* took a lot of water. It was still an hour till the tide turned. We got in under the lee of the island and began hauling. Only two creels were broken. There was a lobster in all the others and two lobsters in three of them. We baited the creels and set them again.

"A good place," said Sander.

Eynhallow lay like a green, foundered ship in the middle of The Roost. The walls of the small monastery were still standing.

"For God's sake," said Bill, "what way would monks have passed all their lives in a place like that?"

"They would have fished," said Sander, "the same as we're doing. And they might have kept a pig or two." He drew up another creel; a lobster clashed its blue armour at us.

"I expect they prayed a lot," said Bill.

THEY had all gone to the haddocks. They left Andrew behind, a young brother from Scotland, to feed the pigs and keep the fires going. He sat in the deep west window of the chapel that summer morning with a feather, an ink-pot, and a bit of old

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parchment. The animals were fed, the fire was banked, the light was burning in the sanctuary. He wrote: "What may I scrieve but anerlie the tale of Everyman, an erst puissant earl that goeth now in beggar's rags? 'Everyman I am, unkent I gang thorough this usurpit kingrik. Meikle men I erst had governaunce of. They are turned from me, ilk ane. Ride they now, proud horsemen, thorough corn and pasture, their names are callit Lust, Greed Gluttony, Sloth, Pride, Envy, Anger, meikle upstarts, meikle anarchy. I sit at the corner of the stye, a gangrel swine-herd, that once held all that fair land in feif for a great king. And what if he should come suddenly again and seek of me a reckoning? Hard it would go then with this swineherd. Ilk hour my sharp thoughts seek to slander and to slay the King I hae been traitor bil. *Whatna King?* they sneer. *We have kent no sic king. That king is thrust forth in banishment eterne. This is but an imagined king. The king is deid.* Yea, but did I not break his bread one time? Bear I not yet among thae rags the most precious cup of his passion? I will yet keep that from the mouth of beasts. Wherefore I say, even among these ruts and stinks and rootings, whereof I am fallen lord, *Adveniat regnum tuum.*' "

The scribe dips his feather in the stone jar of ink and writes the fable slowly on the skin. Each word takes a long time to shape. But there is no hurry. He is anxious over the curve and fall of every letter, how it leans to the horizontal like a ship balanced and freighted. It carries a cargo from eternity into time, an allegory, a God-tiding. Maybe an Eynhallow monk will read it after he is dust. He forms another letter with care and reverence. He dips his feather once more in the stone ink-well; then quickly raises his head. He has heard the scrape of a boat on the beach.

* * *

"I set a score of creels behind Gairsay too," said Sander. He swung the tiller round.

It was much quieter in the middle of the firth. Eynhallow fell away behind us, a ghost in the rain. Clouds and sea were all mixed up in one dreich swirl. We took plenty of water from both. It was raining hard most of the time. The sea was grey. The sky was grey too, shading to black over Eday but bright like scraped lead over Gairsay and Rendall.

"Here we are," said Bill. The floats rocked on the swell.

We had a worse haul off Gairsay. Every second creel was empty. But there was none broken. It was more sheltered working, except for the rain that kept coming in squalls.

"Bastard rain," said Bill, squeezing it out of his beard.

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"You boys swear too much," said Sander, who was a Plymouth Brother. "The rain is good rain, for the Lord gives it."

Gairsay rose out of the firth, a steep hill, with one large empty farm. We baited the creels again and set them in new water.

"That's a poor lonely place," said Bill, "with only sheep on it, and yet it seems to have been well farmed once. Look at that big steading."

"That's Langskaill," said Sander.

Sander swung in a creel with two lobsters in it. One of them was dead. The lobsters had jousted like knights at the sea bottom, in their tarry arena. Sander pulled out the live one and tied his victorious claws with twine.

"A poor island," said Bill.

IN the long hall of Gairsay sat a man with an ale-horn at his elbow and a crude map of broken western coasts on his knee. The spring sowing was over. The ship *Drake* was out of the shed. The women had put on board the ale and the new bread and the salted meat. Ploughmen and shepherds carried into her sails and swords and oars; until harvest summoned them home they would be seamen, Vikings. Towns and churches would know of them. *A furore Normanorum, libera nos, Domine.* The last roller was taken from under the keel. The man folded his map and stood up. Beside the barn a girl covered her face in her apron. Sweyn Asleifson the captain was on board now. The anchor was raised. The ship was on the sea.

Summer came, with tall skies and surges of wind in the green corn. Gairsay was full of the voices of women, birds, children—sometimes a quiet harp on either side of the small twilight, for Sweyn's poet had stayed at home this summer.

It is August now, the last days of the hot month. The girl with the milkpail sees a square sail between Rousay and Evie. Is it the *Drake*? No, this ship has a heavy crimson sail, like a cloud after sunset. She sits on the water like the *Drake*, it's true. She leans between wind and sea like the *Drake*. She fits the horizon like the *Drake*. The girl drops her pail and runs into Langskaill. And soon the light dancer, the masker with the crimson sail, is anchored off the rock. It is the *Drake*.

What has the ship brought back to Orkney? Sweyn Asleifson the Viking captain, Rolf, Grettir, Thorkeld, Thorvald, Thorfinn, Arn, Einar, Erling, Bui, Jon, Eylot. But where are Hrut the ploughman and Rollo the shepherd?

Listen first to the story of Hrut.

Hrut grazed his foot on a broken shell at Uist, on the beach,

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on his way up to an alehouse there. After his hangover the next day a worse trouble came on him. The graze began to beat and throb, and all his leg swole and turned blue, and soon after the thunder reached his groin Hrut was dead. Not much attention was paid to the death of Hrut; he was an unpopular man. And Rollo? Ah, that was different, there was nothing undignified or comical about the end of Rollo.

Listen now to the story of Rollo.

There was a strong fortified house in Penzance and the Orkneymen were round it for two days with axes and fire and loud weighted insults. But the place was well and skilfully defended. Those inside had no lack of arrows, stones, buckets of boiling tar.

The Orkneymen could not get near the place because of concentrated fire from the slotted windows above and on each side of the main door.

Rollo said, "Somebody must get to that door and hack it down." So he walked up to the door with his axe in his hand. A deluge of tar spattered and smoked at his heel. An arrow went clean through his beard and stuck quivering in the ground. A large stone glanced off his helmet with a sound like a church bell.

"I will perhaps have a headache in the morning," said Rollo. He reached the door and was in the act of raising his axe to demolish the lock when three arrows struck him simultaneously. The arrow ends stuck out of his back like rapturous birds. "Now I don't need to worry about that headache in the morning," said Rollo. His axe clattered on the stones and he fell dead in front of the house.

The Orkneymen besieged the house all night but they couldn't get in. They set fire to the barns and stables and sailed for Scilly at first light next morning. Everyone agreed that Rollo had had a good death.

What had the *Drake* brought back to Gairsay?

An Irish girl in a long yellow dress.

And also?

Twelve large golden coins and three hundred and forty-one silver coins, a barrel of red wine, bulbs of lilies and daffodils from Scilly, a tapestry of Greek gods with a sword slash in it (but Thora will mend it with her coloured wools), two English hounds (a third died of sea-sickness in the Minch), a spinning wheel from the Hebrides, a church bell and a silver chalice from Iona (which will be returned next year, Sweyn having expressly forbidden the looting of churches in compliance with a request

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from his friend William, Bishop of Orkney, and having punished the thief Thorvald by keeping him at the oar and depriving him of ale for three nights and days), seven talking birds in a cage, a great web of crimson broadcloth which they had sewn on to their sails so that the *Drake* might have a stylish home-coming.

And what did they bring?

The death of a Summer.

The fields were as yellow now as the Irish girl's dress. They walked between the yellow fields and the long hall. Inside, the sound of a solitary harp. The poet had stayed at home all summer, among the women and the birds and the growing corn. He would put the story of that voyage in verse later, in winter, over the fires, so that even the sailors themselves would relish the poem better than the voyage, and glimpse a beauty behind the boasting and the brutality.

* * *

"And I have a score of creels at the tail of Egilsay," said Sander. "I would like to get them hauled too. That's the lot then."

The wind had freshened a bit and it was driving the rain northwards, over Eday and Westray. The dark curtains trailed farther from us. The clouds brightened and here and there let through some sun. Away to the left Eynhallow was momentarily transfigured, then the flying bronze touched the cliffs of Rousay and moved on over the Rousay hills, Kearfea and Blotchnifiold.

We were taking plenty of sea though.

Sander pushed the tiller from him. The *Emily* went round in a wide circle. We ran into sudden pools of sun; the sea lost its greyness; it flashed with changing colour like the heart of an opal; then it was grey again; and the round-towered stone kirk of Egilsay took for a moment the uncertain glory.

We pulled the creels in quickly, with stiff hands. It was a middling catch, twelve lobsters from the score of creels. We baited the creels again and set them a little to the west.

"And when we get back," said Bill, "I'm going to sit a whole hour at the pub fire and I'm going to drink three double whiskies straight off, one after the other."

"You boys drink too much," said Sander mildly.

"No water in the glass," said Bill. "Between rain and sea I've tholed enough water for one day. And tonight," he said, looking at Sander defiantly, "I'm going to the women."

The sky was clearing quickly. The fading rain was a dark bruise in the north. Surge after surge of light went over the firth and the islands, until Egilsay, the island of Saint Magnus the Martyr, stood at last in full hard light.

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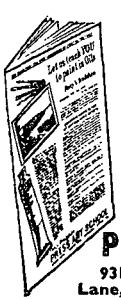

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"Goodbye, Egilsay," said Bill. "What a place! We didn't get much out of you."

Sander turned the *Emily* round.

THE church island, Egilsay, beaten on by three lights—sea, sky, sanctity.

What had Egilsay done to deserve holiness? Nothing.

It was a poor island, bog and rock, not beautiful, though there were beautiful islands lying all round it. Then the axe and the skull held their dialogue over a new furrow.

The bishop would not have sent one of his best priests there—I think perhaps an old man, a bit cross with sciatica and boredom. Would his face light up when he saw a child or a new lamb or a daffodil? Perhaps the old, withered apples of his face shone a little then.

One April morning there was a strange face among the peasant women kneeling at Mass. The man had good clothes and his head and beard were barbered. The old priest had never seen him before. *Introibo ad altare Dei.* He went up the three steps of the altar. Then, as always, he wove his mortal thoughts into the heavy golden warp of the Mass.

"Now to God and the saints and my people and this stranger I confess that I have sinned. They in their turn confess to God and the saints and to me that they too have sinned.

"The water and the wine are on the stone ledge. The boy guards them. Outside, at the door, there is the clang of a plough or a sword. The world goes about its business."

Dominus vobiscum.

"They return me the same fair greeting.

"The Epistle. The boy carries the Word, circling round, dipping and fluttering like a bird, between one horn of the altar and the other." *Cleanse my lips.* "They stand, the women of Egilsay. The blessed Gospel assures them that Christ is risen from the dead. It is the morning of Easter Monday. A man risen out of his grave. Can they believe that? They believe it, they are poor ignorant passionate women. The cultured stranger in his broadcloth might have more difficulty in swallowing such a thing.

"Metal against stone, outside. Loud voices. There are more strangers in Egilsay today than just this one stranger inside the church. Probably there is to be a hunt. The lairds have come from all over Orkney with hawks and nets and dogs."

Credo in unum Deum.

"The boy comes eagerly to me with the wine and the water. He it is who, like the boy with the loaves and fishes, brings the

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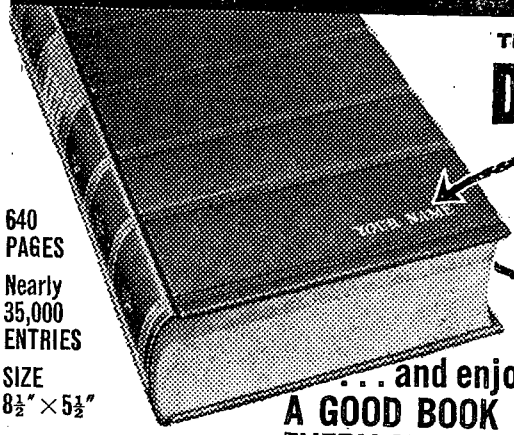

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gifts of all here present to the Lord. Little enough they have to offer, those people. A few blades of corn, a few crabs and sillocks. They are exceedingly poor, and the war of the earls has made them poorer than ever. Horsemen in the corn, Vikings among the nets. This bread and this wine is the sign of their giving. With these they offer God everything that is theirs—their bunions, their jars of oil, bright hearth-stones, the long nights they lie awake listening to the sea on the rock when the fishermen are out. What the stranger could offer I do not know. He looks like a man of no small possessions, of whom we are told that it will be difficult for them to enter the Kingdom. We cannot tell. Priest and people, we offer together the bread and wine, our sacrifice."

Orate, fratres.

"Saint and angel and holy soul are summoned to witness the things we do. A whole heaven of shining ones is crowded into this stone kirk, as thick as corn on the side of Kearfea on a bright windy August day. Will it be, perhaps, that one or two of those same earthy people will be quickened, that the green shoot and the golden stalk will soar out of their brutishness, fit ones for the threshing-floors of purgatory? Doubtless. All of them, I pray. For this we were born.

"The little cry of the altar bell is lost in the clash of swords outside.

"Once more I have done it. What seems to be impossible has happened. The Body and the Blood of Our Lord lie on the altar before me. It is accomplished. The church is drowned in a terrible and beautiful silence.

"A mouse scrapes in the hollow wall of the church."

Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi miserere nobis.

"God is come among us. Our little gifts of bread and wine he returns to us loaded with blessing and beauty and peace and love and glory illimitable." *Ecce Agnus Dei.* "Himself he gives to us. I show them the Lord. I place the Host on the few rough tongues and one smooth tongue. The stranger also has received communion."

Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam.

"And the stranger whose face is all an agony of fear and resolution goes back to his place among the peasants who suffer after another fashion."

Ite, missa est.

"The swords outside are louder now, the voices rise into a chant: 'Magnus, Magnus, come out, Magnus.'

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"It is for this stranger, Magnus, that there is all this clash and outcry in Egilsay today. I am sending him out among those swords, into an anger of which I know nothing. I make a quick silent prayer for him, rinsing the chalice with fresh wine.

"And so now when I bless the people of Egilsay at the end of the Mass, I bless him in particular whose face is as bright and as doomed as a stone, with spring sunlight on it, that the builders will soon gather into a new wall."

Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus. Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus.

* * *

We landed three boxes of lobsters from the flattie. Sander took his purse out of his hip pocket and carefully thumbed out four pounds, two pounds to Bill and two pounds to me. Then he crossed the field to the licensed grocer's to phone to the Fishermen's Society.

Bill and I hauled the flattie high up till its bow was cleaving the clover and buttercups of the links, out of reach of the long waves.

Sander came back from the licensed grocer's with a half-bottle of whisky in his hand. He uncorked it ceremonially. We squatted on the pier in our shiny oilskins, in the lee of the boat-shed. The lobsters shuffled slowly in their boxes. Sander gave the half-bottle to Bill first. Bill held it up and said, "Skol." He pushed it into his mouth and tilted it. A little runnel of whisky ran down his chin. He grunted as if he had been hit in the stomach. He wiped the top of the half-bottle with his sleeve and passed it to me. I drank from it and passed it to Sander. The spirit licked round my cold guts like flame.

"No," said Sander piously, "I have never drunk spirits or ale in my life." He gave the half-bottle to Bill again.

"You don't know what you're missing," said Bill.

"I'm very beholden to you boys for coming out with me on a morning like this," said Sander.

Bill handed the half-bottle to me. I had another drink and then said, "But you paid us well."

Nothing more was said till the whisky was all drunk and Bill sent the empty half-bottle crashing among the stones of the beach.

Then Sander said, "You hauled the flattie too high up. It was ebbing when we landed."

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These three stories, and others by George Mackay Brown, will be included in his collection, "A Calendar of Love", to be published by Chatto and Windus at 21s. in January.

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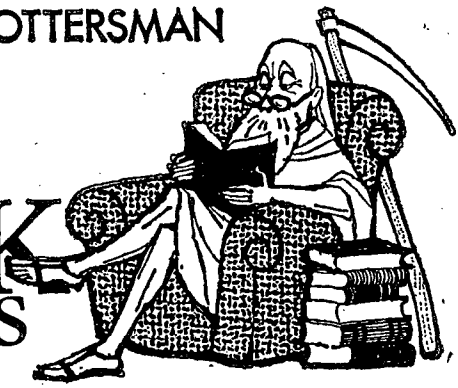
BY ARTHUR POTTERSMAN



BOOK REVIEWS

☐ **A BELATED BEHAN.** Escaping man is the theme of Brendan Behan's first novel, a real literary discovery, published now for the first time in book form. He wrote *The Scarperer* (Hutchinson, 21s.) in 1953 under the pseudonym Emmet Street and had it published in the *Irish Times* as a serial.

The Scarperer is Mr. Big of the Dublin underworld who helps crooks escape from jail, for a fee of five thousand pounds. For The Limey, a much-wanted English gangster, this money is a small price to pay for freedom, although he reckons that once he is out of jail he will evade The Scarperer's men and not pay the fee at all.

The key to the plot is that The Limey resembles Pierre Le Fou, an infamous French killer. Le Fou has arranged with The Scarperer, for fifty thousand pounds, that The Limey, once out of jail, should be killed and his corpse planted so that everyone will think Le Fou is dead.

And, begorrah, The Scarperer succeeds! The plot fairly whistles along, with a wretched meths drinker known as Trembles Tralee planted in the cell to make the warders think The Limey is still there.

The Limey is smuggled out of Dublin in a coffin, muttering "I'm sorry I ever left the nick. I just didn't know when I was well off." He is put on a boat and, on the way to France, tattoos are marked upon his arm so as to make the resemblance to Pierre Le Fou exact. The Limey accepts the tattoos as part of his new disguise, but he only realises too late what is being planned for him, when The Scarperer's men, having fed him with doped Calvados, carry him to the French ship's side, to throw him overboard.

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There is a wonderfully Irish trick ending to this Behan thriller —involving mistaken identity and a potty old woman—which I shall not give away.

☐ **OXBRIDGE EXPOSED.** Intriguing man gets a thorough going-over in John Vaizey's *Barometer Man* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 21s.). This good-humoured novel is set at a mythical Cambridge college and concerns the election of a new Warden. The intriguer in the novel is Patrick South, an *entrepreneur* among the academics, all out for himself, with a bit of what energy is left over for his friends. South is also a practical joker who likes to send fake telegrams to pompous dons. He is so busy manipulating people that one evening he finds himself dining at college, while a table full of guests are awaiting him at a nearby restaurant. He sorts this situation out by ducking out of the college dining hall after each course has been served and dashing to the hotel where he nibbles a course with his guests, wining them so well that soon they hardly notice his absences.

I must say I like the dons of Vaizey's book. They are, on the whole, an eccentric bunch—endearing so long as you don't think about them as educators of the young, skyvers on public funds.

The college's Warden, for instance, a wealthy man, is reputed to read nothing but share certificates and market reports. The youngest fellow, Higginbrother, has a job created by a television firm teaching market economics. He therefore reckons it his duty to talk about nothing but TV programmes.

Dons at High Table, as their place in the college dining hall is called, do not have amusing, learned, or cultivated conversations. "In my experience," says the narrator of Vaizey's novel, "it is usually about motor cars or undergraduates."

☐ **CAMPAIGN AGAINST CALLOUSNESS.** Vengeful man starts off as the theme of Sol Yurick's new novel, *Fertig* (W. H. Allen, 30s.), but by the time I had finished this savage onslaught upon America's Establishment I half wondered whether the bitterness was not the author's as much as his central character's.

Harry Fertig was a hard-working, unassuming New York accountant. He and his wife, Sara, are proudest and happiest about their son, Stevie, born to them relatively late in their married life. Then Stevie dies due to the callousness of the hospital staff.

After his son's death, the grief-stricken father resigns from his job, and follows key hospital personnel around until he knows their daily routine to the minute. Then he strikes, killing seven people whom he holds responsible for his son's death—from governors of the hospital to the shrewish reception-clerk who would not let him see a doctor in the first place.

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The police find him after six weeks, by a slow, laborious, but effective routine. He admits his guilt. It is like closing a set of books to him. "Since they ran the hospital, they were responsible. You see, killing balanced it out, and my being caught closes the account. That's why I had to be caught."

Alas for poor Fertig, being caught only opens another, more vicious account for him. I cannot recall having ever read a more savage denunciation of so-called professional men before. The doctors, lawyers, influential journalists, who take up Fertig's case for their own advancement, all feel the author's lash.

Now I must warn that this novel is not, as they say, for the squeamish. Some parts of it are too purple, perhaps at times needlessly brutal and explicit. The characterisation is largely two-dimensional. But it is only fair to add that Sol Yurick has written a campaigning novel, a muck-raking book in the good old tradition. In his assault upon hypocrisies, the cruelties of man to man, he has certainly succeeded.

☐ **GOTHIC AND GRIPPING.** Why are the Americans so bad at writing spy thrillers? I am prompted to ask because of two new spy thrillers, both from Gollancz.

One of them—the American one—is a Book Society Choice. The other is to receive no such accolade. The American thriller, *The Night is A Time For Listening* by Elliot West (25s.), has been described in the United States as "the major spy novel of 1966". I cannot imagine what the author of that hyperbole will say about John Bingham's *The Double Agent* (21s.), for it is much lower in key, subdued and grey, full of doubts and mistrust, but not obsessed with such abstractions as loyalty or patriotism.

And Bingham's is the book that rings true—not only because he is well-up when it comes to the background of his story, but because he catches how men behave and react. Elliot West, like most of his fellow-American spy writers, writes about spies as heroes, or double agents as villains; he writes about them as the ancient Greeks liked to read about their gods. There is nothing human or interesting about such over-stated deeds.

Elliot West writes about an American journalist determined to find the Nazi who tortured his French Resistance wife to death. The Russians let him think they have his man, and will hand him over *if* the American (who happens to have a photographic memory) acts as courier for a Soviet spy ring in London.

American makes contact with London spy ring, organised by a treacherous scion of British aristocracy with an almost unpronounceable name. Spy ring crumbles. American panics. Turns

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out to have fallen in love with traitor scientist's wife. Gets her out to Berlin, lest Communists in London assassinate her for knowing too much. Finds the man he thought was CIA in Berlin really is not. And then, heaven help us all, after these acrobatics the book actually has a grey ending. Someone somewhere has been reading too much Le Carré.

There are signs of an intelligence somewhere behind all this Gothic agony. This is the story of a man who tried to use the espionage machine, and how the machine, as always, used him instead. But all those melodramatics about goodies and baddies . . . if only life were so complicated!

How different is John Bingham. He writes about a double agent, Sugden, a textile salesman who deliberately allows himself to be blackmailed into working for the Soviets. Sugden's assignment: to bring back any information he can that will expose the soft underbelly of the decadent West. Politicians with mistresses, journalists with money problems, scientists with difficult marriages—anything that may make men susceptible to bribes or pressure.

This novel concentrates on men: the trapped double agent himself—how he resists torture, but is not immune to all pressures; how his London chiefs fret and worry about the cruelties they perpetrate—and then go on doing them; how his Moscow captors themselves may be broken by the obdurate courage of a spy who will not confess.

☐ **EARLY LIFE AND ORDEALS.** Nicholas Monsarrat is best known for his awesome novel of Navy life, *The Cruel Sea.* This month we have a chance to discover a little bit about the making of this man's character: his prosperous Liverpool upbringing, his life as a starving artist among London's Left-wingers in the nineteen-thirties. He has written his autobiography, *Life Is A Four-Letter Word*, calling the first part *Breaking In* (Cassell, 42s.). Much of it is too frank and sensational. But one part of this book is indeed memorable—the long chapter Monsarrat calls *A Season in Hell*, about his life at the famous public school, Winchester. He writes, "I thought Winchester was an awful place, and I still do. It might only have been my own House, which had a reputation for vicious cruelty unmatched among the other nine. It might have been simply that the time I was there coincided with a certain disgusting peak of bullying and tyranny. It might have been my own fault—in the sense that I was a misfit or a fool or a born loser. But the fact remains that most of the five years I spent at Winchester were a never-to-be-forgotten ordeal."

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ANSWERS TO CHRISTMAS PUZZLES

P. 59: 1 U.S.S.R., 2 Metropolitan Opera House, New York; Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra*, 3 45 days, 4 News appeared on page one of *The Times* for the first time, 5 Vidal Sassoon's, 6 The Battle of Hastings (900 years); the birth of H. G. Wells (100 years); Westminster Abbey (900 years); the Great Fire of London (300 years), 7 Lionel Bart's *Oliver*, 8 The Tay Road Bridge, 9 Evelyn Waugh, 10 Princess Alexandra, 11 M. J. K. Smith, M. C. Cowdrey, D. B. Close, 12 Patrick Nugent on August 6, 13 Christopher Mayhew, 14 *Gypsy Moth IV*, 15 Ninety-seven seats.

P. 60: A joiner, 2 An embroiderer, 3 A ball-room dancer, 4 A surgeon, 5 A cook, 6 A textile-worker, 7 An angler, 8 A gardener, 9 A sail, 10 A style in painting, 11 A musical instrument, 12 A mill for rolling steel ingots, 13 A stagé-hand, 14 A mountaineer, 15 An aviator, 16 At a printing works.

P. 61: 1 Auden, 2 Brontë, 3 Darwin, 4 Proust, 5 Carlyle, 6 Dickens, 7 Strachey, 8 Pinero, 9 Sheridan, 10 Constable, 11 Veronese, 12 Matisse, 13 Smetana, 14 Gershwin, 15 Scarlatti, 16 Verdi.

1 Octave—average, 2 Public—lichen, 3 Sample—pleat, 4 Combat—battery, 5 Errand—random, 6 Stomach—machine, 7 Butcher—cherish, 8 Marquee—queerest, 9 Crisis—island, 10 Ransom—sombre, 11 Solid—idea, 12 Quire—retail, 13 Languid—guiding, 14 Awash—ashamed, 15 Tongues—guessing, 16 Easy—system, 17 Inspect—spectral, 18 Raiment—mention, 19 Dispel—pellet, 20 Forger—germane.

P. 67: **Across:** 1 Foots the bill, 9 Keep right, 10 Index, 11 Outwit, 12 Hacienda, 13 Kernel, 14 Scullers, 17 Unwashed, 19 Caruso, 21 Basilisk, 23 Gemini, 25 Osaka, 26 Anatomist, 27 Heart-rending. **Down:** 2 Overthrow, 3 Termite, 4 Togs, 5 Entrance, 6 Initial, 7 Laden, 8 Expansionist, 9 Knock-out blow, 15 Erudition, 16 Redstart, 18 Sultana, 20 Aneroid, 22 Swath, 24 Ware.

P. 68: 1 Oh, little town of Bethlehem, 2 The mistletoe hung on the castle wall, 3 Once in Royal David's city, 4 As I sat on a sunny bank, 5 God rest ye merry, Gentlemen, 6 Good King Wenceslas looked out, 7 The holly and the ivy, 8 The first Nowell the angels did say, 9 In the bleak midwinter, 10 I heard the bells on Christmas day, 11 The first day of Christmas, 12 We three kings of Orient are, 13 Here we come a-wassailing, 14 Christmas is coming and the goose (geese) is (are) getting fat, 15 Angels from the realms of glory, 16 It came upon the midnight clear.

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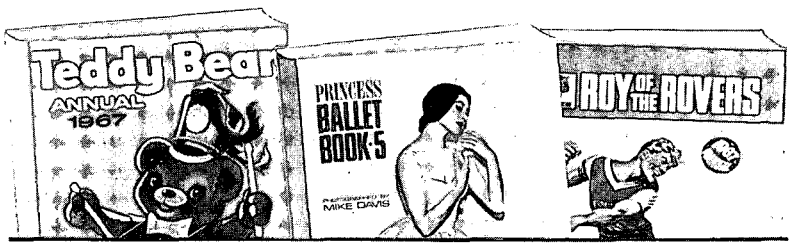

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